



Meet Our Next Veteran Recipient: Army Specialist Joshua Walker of Kenosha, Wisconsin

Joshua Walker has lived in Kenosha, Wisconsin his entire life. He grew up in the country working on farms and spending hours outdoors with his sister and friends making their own fun. They rode bicycles everywhere, hunted and fished, and loved roaming their land on snowmobiles, three-wheelers and dirt bikes. In high school, the 6'5", 260 lb athlete took up swimming, track and field, and football on the defensive line. He describes himself as a "jock" who got along with everyone and was seen as a "big brother" to his many female friends. He had a reputation as a good guy who people could count on and trust; and he had a giant heart to match his very large size.

Joshua hails from a long family of service in WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War. All his life he listened to and admired the stories told, the heroics offered and the struggles worked through; and he desperately longed to do his part. Unfortunately, his ADHD and Dyslexia, let alone his size, disqualified him from enlisting in high school. After graduating in 1996, Josh instead went to trade school, obtaining an education and additional certifications in welding, and prospered in commercial construction. He made a lot of money at a young age; and he used some of that to support his parents and, after years of watching his dad ride, to buy his first motorcycle. It was an old Kawasaki that he fixed up, rode endlessly, and quickly learned why his father enjoyed it so much.

His generation's watershed moment was 9/11 and, in 2001, at age 24, Josh needed to fulfill his longtime sense of duty to his country. He lost weight, obtained waivers and joined the Army National Guard (ANG) for the chance to be on the frontline of the wars we were headed into. In 2002 he set off for Basic and Advanced Individual Training at Fort Benning, Georgia, and the Infantryman specialized as an Indirect Fire Support Mortarman. Training was tough, but it provided him with a sense of purpose and the chance to be a part of something larger than himself. With two simultaneous wars afoot, Josh hoped it wouldn't be long before he was called to deploy.

While in the ANG, Joshua spent his days welding and building, hunting and fishing, and hanging with friends. After dating a woman for nine months, they became pregnant; and right after that life-changing news, Josh received his orders to deploy in very quick fashion. In June 2004, on the day he left for mobilization preparation, the soldier married his girl in his parents backyard; and a few hours later, flew out to Camp Shelby Joint Forces Training Center in Mississippi for his chance to carry on his family's wartime lineage. He came home briefly for the birth of his daughter, then left again, not to return for another 18 months...nor would he return the man he once was.

In November 2004, as part of the 32nd "Red Arrow" Infantry Brigade, Josh's Unit landed in Iraq and stationed at Forward Operating Base (FOB) O'Ryan, a small launching base for tactical operations in the middle of the volatile Sunni Triangle. They were there to rotate out another ANG Unit; and quickly learned just how much that Unit needed to go home. There were holes in the ground for bathrooms, no showers or cooking facilities, and diesel-fed fires of garbage and human waste that he would soon tend around the clock. It was barebones living in a sandbox; but even worse were the murals on the side of their buildings bearing the names and images of nearly half the Platoon's soldiers killed in action before them. And this would become his "home" for the next year.

While there Joshua filled a multitude of roles, doing whatever job was needed at the time...and it was nothing like what he'd trained for or expected. While on the FOB, he provided base overwatch and tower security to monitor perimeter activity, access, and incoming fire. From the FOB he traversed the densely populated area doing route clearance, convoy security, and patrol duty, both mounted and dismounted. His Unit moved across the resistant Muslim stronghold on roads, and through towns, known for their IED placement and amongst a people known for treachery. When needed, they provided logistics support for Camp Anaconda to the north as fuel and supplies moved along the critical, and highly targeted, Route Tampa to other bases. Every single day they encountered suspicious actions, objects and people, and he learned to treat everything and everyone with wariness and hesitation. They engaged in frequent firefights and indirect fire; and as a result of it all, saw violence and death as a routine part of their job and became desensitized to its sheer magnitude.

One day while driving his up-armored Humvee, an IED detonated under his vehicle, splitting the vehicle in half, and sending him and his gunner rolling down an embankment to land upside down in the filthy canal water. After reorienting himself and escaping the Humvee, Josh was seemingly uninjured; his partner, on the other hand, was

more banged up. With assistance they returned to base; and after a brief examination Joshua was cleared to report back to duty the next day. He went on to endure more explosive impacts, more gunfire, and more mortar fire that would further traumatize an undiagnosed brain injury. He went on to collect more sights, smells, and experiences that would further mar his embattled psyche. And to do his job, he would tamp down every exposure, pain and emotion to complete his tour—describing everything after the injury as a blur.

In November, 2005, after a year in combat, Josh returned home to Kenosha, an entirely different man, and faced a barrage of domestic battles he wasn't prepared for nor capable of handling. After a year and a half away, he came home to a marriage he'd barely had and to get to know the daughter he'd barely held from a pregnancy he scarcely experienced. He came home to learn of significant debt amassed in his absence. He came home to learn his wife's drug problem impacted his daughter and had required his mother to assume care for her. And Josh came home... then fell apart.

Joshua readily admits his mind was in "a very bad place" after coming home. Memories flooded in, flashbacks occurred routinely, and night terrors both haunted his dreams and stole his sleep. People didn't understand him, nor did he understand himself. He couldn't figure out how to work and interact as he once did, and he lost jobs. Josh turned to alcohol to settle his mind and growing anxiety, further fueling his downward spiral. He struggled with memory loss, often not knowing where he was or who he was; and when found, would wake in a VA hospital. After several emergency admissions, he was subjected to a Medical Review Board. In September, 2006 Josh was diagnosed with PTSD, at a 30% disability, along with tinnitus, and medically retired.

The PTSD disability rating allowed more care and a small financial allowance; but despite both, Josh had many more layers of hell to travel through. He shares, "I was not a good person" as guilt, confusion, and irritability quickly escalated into uncontrollable rage and violent outbursts. He was placed on a slew of medications for his PTSD that collectively left him apathetic and depressed. And believing he was a burden to others, Josh drank even more and misused his medications, without regard for life, silently seeking an end to the pain he both carried and inflicted. Amidst his rapid deterioration, he divorced, damaged key familial relationships and lost friends causing him to further withdraw into a world where nobody understood the invisible struggle of someone who looked normal.

Joshua's growing mental health struggles consumed his life and eventually affected his neuropsychological, cognitive and occupational functioning. He experienced debilitating non-epileptic seizures as his brain tried to handle all it had been through. As his mind shut down further, he lost the ability to care for himself, maintain basic physical functions and communicate. By January, 2007, his PTSD disability had been increased to 100%, and set him on a long, eight year path that included VA group home living, inpatient admissions and an intense focus on PTSD programs, counseling, anger management and drug and alcohol treatment. Josh additionally went through speech and occupational therapy as he learned how to talk and walk once more, cook, do laundry and care for himself all over again. He spent years rebuilding cognitive processing, emotional coping skills, and life management skills. In fact, he retook driver's education to regain a license to support his independent living. Sadly, it would take those same eight years before the physical injuries to his brain would be recognized.

As Joshua repeatedly failed short-term memory tests, staff realized he wasn't exaggerating about his inability to remember things and began looking into his explosive claims. Josh shares, "Things blew up all the time and we moved on. We just didn't think about what it was doing to our heads, it was all just part of the job we did." And since he was deemed "ok" that one night when an IED ripped his vehicle in half, and without any diagnostic capabilities, the paperwork never followed. Joshua finally received a long-overdue diagnosis of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) from the many likely concussive events he was subjected to. It was a diagnosis long overdue and a diagnosis that finally validated his struggles as more than just psychological.

It was a long hard road for Josh; but he was committed to finding and living a better life and, just as important, to becoming the good person he was before he went to war. After years of therapy, he began reacclimating socially, but found employment too difficult to navigate with his short-term memory deficits. Instead, he volunteered at a school then joined several Veteran organizations to support his community and help others move through similar struggles. In 2016 Josh went to his Tremper High School reunion and ran into Krissy, a middle school and high school classmate. When he learned she was coming off a rough divorce with four children, he offered to help her with needs around the home. Their relationship grew as they learned to care for each other...and as friendship turned into love, they married in 2019 and combined their families.

Krissy has been a rock of support when Josh gets frustrated and down on himself, and she is his organizational super-power battling his memory challenges with reminders on schedules, medications and plans. He can remember details from service 20 years ago, but not what he had for breakfast. Even with weekly counseling

sessions still, his overlapping PTSD and TBI symptoms impact most facets of his life and every day is loaded with work-arounds to help. Josh is still hypervigilant in public places, has disruptive nightmares he forgets that morning, and the occasional flashback that takes him by surprise. Garbage and bloated roadside animals makes him nervous as he considers IED placement. Seeing hijabs and burkas can stop him in his tracks as he scans for safety; and explosive noises greatly startle an unprepared man. While he's developed skills and support to manage the public experiences, his memory is often quick to betray him. As Josh has aged, his body has betrayed him as well, developing struggles with cardiac and diabetic health. He learned this spring that benign nodules were growing in his lungs, likely the result of burn pit exposures, and had part of his lung removed without complication. And while Krissy works at a local daycare, Josh cares for the kids and household's needs, and shares his time helping others. In fact, with football season upon us, he's been helping coach a middle school team, appreciating any chance he has to pay it forward and support others through struggles he understands.

As Joshua has found himself moving forward successfully, an aching need from decades ago resurfaced: the need to ride. With the help of his friend and former Sergeant, Josh rebuilt an old motorcycle that resparked his riding interest. In 2019 he retook riding classes, gained his endorsement and bought a 2000 H-D Ultra Classic. He quickly took to riding and settled his mind from the release and joy it provided. In 2022, Josh joined the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) Chapter 45-1 to reconnect with a brotherhood he absolutely loves and Krissy joined the Auxiliary for the support found amongst Veteran's spouses. In 2023, Josh hit a patch of gravel and rolled into the ditch, totaling his bike. After recovering from his injuries, they decided a trike would be a more stable option for his changing health and bought a 20 year old Harley-trike conversion last year. After only a few months riding, the axle broke while on the road. Fixing the bike would be far more expensive than the bike is worth, rendering it beyond repair. Without means to buy a replacement of any kind, he and Krissy "cage it" to stay connected with group events; but without a bike, their continued CVMA membership is at risk. Hogs For Heroes Advisory Board felt the pain and determination behind this man's healing journey. More importantly, we saw the opportunity to support a passion that has helped strengthen him and his marriage; and our Board selected Josh as a 2025 Recipient.

Our more than successful fundraising in 2024 allowed for a planned ten Harley and Veteran pairings this year– a far cry from our goal of one a year. In April, 2025 our friends at the Tavern League of Wisconsin (TLW) gifted us a combination of donations totaling over \$38,000, which allowed us to extend our 2025 gifts from ten to a surprise eleventh. Having already believed our selections were done for the year, Josh was beyond stunned by our good news and deeply grateful for the chance to ride again. After searching online for trikes in his area, he found a beautiful blue 2020 H-D Tri Glide, with only 6,200 miles on it, sitting on the floor at Suburban Motors Harley-Davidson in Thiensville, WI. Not only was it in his favorite color, it had sparkles and pinstriping that made it even more spectacular for him.

Unique to Josh's trike, it is the second bike this year to be fully sponsored by TLW, and their sixth overall since 2021. We will be presenting this trike during The Main Street Tap's Annual Car & Bike Show, in Twin Lakes, WI, on Saturday, August 23, 2025 and his Presentation of Keys Ceremony will start promptly at 12:30 pm. We will be hanging out in the park, amongst cool cars and bikes, from 10:30-2:30, looking for the chance to meet you and tell you more about our uniquely Wisconsin nonprofit's efforts to heal our injured Veterans with a different kind of therapy.