



COPING IN THE FACE OF CRISIS

WDVA EMPLOYEE RECIPIENT OF NEW HARLEY MOTORCYCLE

For many, collecting and riding motorcycles serves as a hobby. For some, riding is a way of life. For Brian Russow, motorcycles were a lifesaver.

Russow wasn't quite sure where his career would lead him. After graduating from high school in Appleton, he worked at a couple of odd jobs trying to find the right fit in life. With little direction, he enlisted into the Marine Corps in 1994 because he "had nothing better to do," he said. It was a decision that greatly affected the remainder of his life.

After many years of dedicated service and hard work in the military, Russow, a custodian in Ainsworth Hall at the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Home at King, was recently the recipient of a new Harley-Davidson motorcycle (2018 H-D Heritage Softail Classic 114 in Silver Fortune). It was a gesture that brought an emotional feel to many, especially because of the long battle Russow has faced since his service time.

Russow was one of two recipients who received Harley-Davidson motorcycles from **Hogs for Heroes**, a nonprofit organization that raises funds to purchase motorcycles and donate them to deserving Veterans. The selection of Russow was quite appropriate, as motorcycles have helped give him not only a hobby, but a means of therapy.

Riding gives him something to take his mind off the mental and physical scars after serving for so long during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Motorcycles were a hobby that captivated Russow when he was a teenager, and he finally purchased one in 2008, a 1979 Kawasaki. He found incredible relief while riding, and purchased his first-ever Harley — a 1992 H-D Softail — a few years later. But a serious accident last year involving a deer totaled the bike and left him injured. He's since healed physically, but the absence of riding took quite an emotional toll on Russow. That's when Hogs for Heroes heard his story and stepped up to offer its assistance.

It's help that although Russow would never ask for, has gone a long way.

Traumatizing Times

Russow served nine years in the Marines as a Combat Engineer, and was first deployed in 2003 as part of the initial push into Iraq. He spent his days building bridges from Kuwait to Baghdad while also experiencing significant tension, violence and threats of terror. Burn pits, excessive gear, endless responsibilities and excessive heat wore him down. But still, Russow powered through and returned home only to contemplate reenlisting. A series of family matters once returning home led to a downward

spiral and a personal war that many were unsure he'd ever recover from.

Severe depression, anxiety, paranoia, hypervigilance, nightmares and sleep apnea all weighed heavily on Russow daily, and a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis didn't resolve much. But instead of dwelling on the situation, Russow kept moving forward and pushing through barriers like he'd consistently done while serving overseas.

In 2006, he took matters in his own hands by helping form the **Desert Veterans of Wisconsin**, a Veterans Service Organization with more than 300 members in northeast Wisconsin. Nowadays, Brian is married to Robin, who he met three years after he was discharged. They've been married for 12 years and have four children together.

By managing his symptoms, Russow has experienced happiness once again. And although his physical service has concluded, he hasn't stopped giving back to the Veterans community. He's been a hardworking WDVA employee since April and continues to set an example for many. In addition to motorcycles, Russow enjoys camping, hunting and fishing. He has a service dog in training that helps him to cope and allows for some comfort in public settings.

The WDVA thanks Russow for his sacrifices, determination and continued service to our nation and Veterans.