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“WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT EMPOWERED ME TO LIVE”.
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After enlisting in the military straight out of high school in 1986 and serving for eight years, Chris Hoff was honorably discharged. He transitioned to civilian life, took a job, and got engaged. But seven years later, the events of September 11 made him so angry he re-enlisted in the Army Reserve the very next day. “We lost our innocence, so to speak,” says Chris. “I remember telling my brother, ‘I’m leaving tomorrow if I can.’”

In 2004, on only his third day in Afghanistan, Chris suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) during Humvee rollover training. But like many TBIs at the time, it went undiagnosed, and he was sent back to work. A few days later, Chris’ unit lost six soldiers and he was asked to attend the fallen comrade ceremony that followed. “I touched every single casket,” remembers Chris. “I’d come off each casket crying like a baby. I wound up doing 123 of those ceremonies.”

Always wanting to help his team complete its mission, Chris volunteered for a variety of extra tasks during his deployments — including the difficult job of delivering the bodies of locals who had been killed to their families. “One of my last ones is where I think my brain snapped,” says Chris. One of the body bags he was delivering was callously thrown on a table with no respect for the deceased person inside. “That thump sound wakes me up probably five or six times a week.”

After returning home, Chris’ post-traumatic stress disorder sent him into a downward spiral. He couldn’t go back to his former job, and his wife divorced him. He felt useless and had no clear vision of what to do next. “I thought I had nothing to live for,” says Chris. “I contemplated taking my own life.”

He credits an email inviting him to a Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) equine therapy workshop with saving him. “I thought, ‘Okay, I’ll put off suicide and try this instead,’” says Chris. It was his first step on the path toward recovery.

Since then, Chris has attended many WWP events and programs, including Soldier Ride®. “It was one of the proudest things I ever did,” says Chris. “Seeing soldiers with no legs or one arm use a bike, there was no excuse for why I couldn’t do it. I was honored to ride with them.”

Today, he encourages other warriors to participate in WWP events and reassures them that, even if their injuries aren’t visible, they’re real — and fellow warriors are there to help. “If you keep on living in the past, you’re going to rob yourself of the future,” says Chris. “If you take your life, the bad guys win. If you have problems, talk to people. For a couple of years after I got out, I had to be carried by my fellow warriors. But now that I can carry someone, that’s what I want to do.”

