Fighting to serve others

Greathouse speaks to VA staff about his story of recovery and redemption at the Hershel “Woody” Williams VA Medical Center in Huntington, W.Va. In volunteering and being open about his healing, he serves as an inspiration to other disabled veterans.

DAV’s Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year honored for overcoming incredible odds and serving as an inspiration for others

Adam Greathouse enlisted in the Army in 1999 and, for him, the military proved to be more than a job. It provided a worthy
career and lifestyle that meshed well with his personality. Being part of a team, working to accomplish a mission, and excelling at physical fitness contributed to the fulfillment he couldn’t find as a civilian.

“I was built for it,” he said. “As soon as I joined, I knew I was a lifer.”

But fate had other plans. According to Greathouse, when he deployed to Kosovo in 2001, he suffered a chemical burn that ate holes in his lungs. The toxins, which he suspects were left from the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, mixed with the sand and dust, forming billowing clouds that engulfed the tank Greathouse was riding in, filling the air—and his lungs—with a deadly substance.

His symptoms began with tightness in his chest. Next came hallucinations and labored breathing. Within hours, Greathouse woke up in his barracks room, unable to stand.

A medic rushed Greathouse to the Camp Bondsteel medical tent, where his breathing stopped entirely. He was flown to Germany. His last memory of that time was of a nurse instructing him to count back from 10 as anesthesia took hold.

He woke up two months later, attached to a ventilator with staples stretching from the left side of his chest around to his back. Greathouse, a mighty soldier weighing a solid 215 pounds before the medical emergency, was by then 100 pounds lighter, unable to move his arms or feel anything below his hips. He had suffered a brain injury due to the lack of oxygen, and the exposure had caused organ failure and extensive damage to his lungs.

Doctors estimated Greathouse had a somber 2% chance of survival. His mother was sent an emergency message warning of her son’s impending death, along with an American flag to be draped over his coffin.
“On paper, I shouldn’t be here,” said Greathouse.

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He survived, but as he relearned to walk, write and use the bathroom, one thing became clear: His days of being a soldier in the U.S. Army were numbered.

“I don’t know if I cried so hard in my entire life,” he added. “Everything I knew was ripped away from me.”

The decade that followed included struggles with alcohol abuse, thoughts of suicide and unbearable guilt that he had somehow let his country, his unit and himself down. But that changed in 2011, when staff at the Hershel “Woody” Williams VA Medical Center in Huntington, W.Va., introduced him to recreational therapy on a whitewater rafting excursion down
the Gauley River.

At first, he was skeptical that help was possible.

“I figured I’d go there, piss somebody off and never go again,” said Greathouse, who was then contemplating suicide. “I wasn’t planning on being here much longer.”

But something unexpected happened. As the raft shot down the rapids, with water splashing his face, Greathouse gained back a glimpse of what he found in the Army that he’d lost as a disabled veteran—comradery.

An instructor’s voice shouted commands to everyone in the watercraft, and something clicked with Greathouse.

“I was part of a team again,” he said. “That lit my pilot light; it brings a smile to my face every time I think about it.”

The renewed sense of purpose and belonging was short-lived, however, until he participated in his first National Disabled Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass, Colo., in 2012.

“I took in everything DAV has to offer in Colorado,” said Greathouse, who was the recipient of the event’s 2017 DAV Freedom Award for his remarkable spirit in the face of injury. “‘Miracle on the mountainside’—that’s an understatement.”

“You get a group of vets together trying to do the same thing, and something magical happens,” said Brent Sturm, a recreational therapist who’s worked with Greathouse extensively. “They communicate, they support each other, and they become friends.”

But not only did Greathouse conquer seemingly unbeatable odds to survive, he also remains an inspiration and something of a local celebrity to the patients and staff at the Williams VAMC, where he’s volunteered more than 5,100 hours since 2015—3,400 as a DAV volunteer.
In addition to the thousands of volunteer hours Greathouse has under his belt as a peer mentor, he’s also spoken to over 1,700 veterans and VA staff members, providing valuable insight into what disabled veterans experience in their recovery.

“Adam fills a lot of roles here,” said Teresa Boyes, the facility’s chief of voluntary services. “He works with our recreation therapist and helps quite a bit with our disabled veterans.

“There usually isn’t a dry eye after he speaks,” added Boyes. “It touches the hearts of people to get a small glimpse of what he’s gone through.”

“It’s imperative that veterans come to us for their care, especially for those who may be in crisis,” said Brian Nimmo, a Navy veteran of the Persian Gulf War and director of the center. “Adam’s story helps us potentially reach veterans and encourage them to come here.”

Last year, DAV honored Greathouse again with the Victories for Veterans Award, reserved for veterans who overcome tremendous challenges and serve as an inspiration for others, during the Carolina Country Music Fest in Myrtle Beach, S.C. This year, he received DAV’s top annual honor when he was named its Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

“Adam’s fighting spirit and contagious positive outlook have undoubtedly helped countless veterans get their recoveries on the right track,” said Department of West Virginia Commander Paul DeBerry. “West Virginia is incredibly proud and thankful to have someone like Adam dedicate so much of his time to his fellow veterans.”

“Time and again, Adam has shown that, no matter how hard the fight, you can always come out stronger with the right attitude and support system,” added fellow Army veteran and DAV National Commander Butch Whitehead. “We are blessed to
have Adam within our ranks. He is an inspiration to all veterans, from ones just now stepping off the battlefield to those currently battling in their recovery and beyond.”