



**Brain Injury
Alliance**
ARIZONA

TBI Survivor Cat Hammes: Moving Forward, Supporting Veterans

“Death isn’t ready for me and I’m not ready for death!” That’s the mantra 49-year-old Cat Hammes lives by. In 2006, the Midwestern trauma nurse and motorcycle enthusiast thought that she had already fielded all of the plot twists that life could throw at her. After falling in love with motorcycles at the age of 16 while sneaking a ride on her older brother’s motorcycle, she had a custom motorcycle, a house, and a husband, and owned a small but growing business. To top it all off, she had a career that she loved as a registered nurse. When Cat was on duty, you could count on her to be cool under the intense pressure of the emergency room as she handled critical care cases. You can easily picture Cat decompressing after a grueling shift by riding a motorcycle through the idyllic winding hills of Wisconsin; perhaps the

ease of the open road on a motorcycle balanced out her high-stress work environment. Then, one spring day in May 2006, everything changed.

Cat woke up in a hospital to learn that a motorcycle accident had left her with a brain injury, skull fractures, broken bones, a collapsed lung, and extensive injuries to both legs. She would eventually lose her left leg below the knee, and she describes her right leg as two-thirds metal in a nod to the repairs that have gone into keeping it functional. Gone in an instant was Cat’s most prized possession, an American-made 2006 Harley Davidson Fatboy, and the freedom that came with it seemed not far behind. As she struggled to heal, she had to adjust to life as an amputee and her future became filled with question marks.

There were the practical aspects of her life that



TBI survivor Cat Hammes didn’t let her TBI and loss of one leg diminish her love of the open road.



changed. Her house, with all its stairs, was daunting to return home to. Then there were the emotional aspects: every area of her life now required an adjustment. Cat, a natural people person, had taken pride in her work and the care she provided her patients, but she would no longer be able to return to work in the bustling emergency room. She was also unable to get to her small business during her extensive recovery period and found herself unable to support herself. To meet Cat today is to meet a glowing, confident, strong, and optimistic woman. Cat has a smile that would light up the Texas sky and is often surrounded by friends. Yet Cat describes her fight to reclaim her life in 2006 as the fight of her life and her fight back from hell. She was in her early 40s, a time where you should be reaping the rewards of the hard work of your 20s and 30s. Instead, in a cruel twist, everything she held dear and worked so hard for was slipping away.

How did she get through it? At her darkest hour, she says it was her ability to connect with others and understand their struggles (a skill no doubt honed during her time as a registered ER nurse) that carried her through. As Cat underwent grueling physical therapy, had a prosthetic leg fitted, and healed her spirit, she found herself connecting with injured veterans who were undergoing or had undergone many of the same life transitions and therapies as her.

She promised herself she would do all she could to help those who were injured while protecting our freedom. Cat became active in many different veterans' charities and found it unacceptable that so many of our nation's homeless, one out of every four, are veterans. She knew she had to do something big for the summer of 2014 to raise awareness and money for some of her favorite charities. And so was born Cat's idea for a cross-country motorcycle ride: the 2014 Iron & Ash Ride for Warriors benefitting charities that serve veterans. Cat kicked off the Iron & Ash ride on May 31 from Bulverde, Texas, outside of San Antonio. The ride took her across the country with additional fundraising and promotional stops in Alabama, Virginia, and West Virginia, and finally to Chicago for a June 15 wrap-up party. Deciding to dedicate the ride and raise money for veterans' charities was an easy call for Cat who would also like to see Americans do more to honor Vietnam Veterans. "The reason America has all of its greatness, power, freedom is because it was secured by



TBI survivor Cat Hammes finds strength and healing in giving back to veterans.

this country's veterans," Cat says. "I am not rich in monetary things, but I am in the things that cannot be measured. I give back with time, respect & honor, my most prized possession that I have."

How does Cat, known as the one-legged blonde in the motorcycle community, feel about life today? Well, in July, she posted this on Facebook: "Life isn't going to hand you your dreams so make them happen!" And boy, does she ever. Currently, Cat tours the country participating in charity rides and giving motivational speeches. She has advice for others recovering from traumas. When we spoke that beautiful, sunny day, she said that in her own experience with an amputation and as someone living with a Traumatic Brain Injury, there are times she still wants to scream, "I'm not a freak!" Some people make callous statements out of ignorance, or perhaps fear. If you know someone recovering, offer patience and kindness, not pity. If you are with someone going through trauma, Cat encourages you to recognize that trauma has stages of grief; her trauma was a death of everything she knew. She also encourages you that it won't last forever. Surround yourself with positive influences and get rid of the negative ones, which are toxic to your recovery. Know that it is okay to grieve the life you lost and recognize that some people will say stupid things, but those don't have to change your experience. Forgive them and move on.

Carrie Collins-Fadell is the executive director of the Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona.

