

It's all about  
the Island



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PHOTO BY EMILY SMALL

Heroes' Hunt for Veterans participants gathered in Doug Hansen's kitchen: Marine Gunnery Sgt. Xuchill Laput, Marine Gunnery Sgt. Jeffrey Cheslic, Air Force First Sgt. Todd Kern, retired Lt. Col. Doug Hansen, Marine Sgt. Alejandro Arango, Marine Lance Cpl. Scott Kruchten and Marine Sgt. Mario Herrera.

## Islander brings camaraderie and connection with Heroes' Hunt

By Emily Small

Scott "Krutch" Kruchten is a Marine Corps veteran and Purple Heart recipient from Madison. He is burly and bearded with an armful of tattoos, a ready smile and easygoing good humor. He is straightforward and intelligent when he reflects on

his military experience and life as a veteran.

He is also the sole survivor of an IED attack that killed four fellow Marines and left Kruchten gravely injured.

He says he was "kind of an odd-

ball" when he enlisted in the military at 28 years old, but after 9/11 he started setting challenges for himself. He had a house, a job he loved, two dogs and a motorcycle. He had just walked the Tahoe Rim Trail. He thought he had something to offer as an infantry rifleman and joined the Marines.

On Nov. 8, 2004, just a few months after Lance Cpl. Kruchten was deployed, the Humvee he and Lance Cpl. Shane O'Donnell of DeForest, Wis., Cpl. Robert Warns of

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## Island deals with COVID-19 issues, school goes virtual

By Heidi Hodges

The Island is reportedly currently dealing with a new outbreak of COVID-19. However because the situation began unfolding during the Observer's press time, official numbers and data were not yet updated by the state.

In fact, press-time data showed the Island was still considered one of the municipalities with the lowest risk in the state, with zero cases reported (of those officially tested) in the last seven days.

But things quickly changed Dec. 1. Because of possible cases that had a relationship with the school, the building shut down early that day, and a notice was sent to families. Parents were asked to pick their children up at 1:30.

Without official positive test results, initially, the move was a precaution, the school wrote in the notice. The notice indicated the closure would also allow the school to do deep cleaning.

But on Dec. 2, the school board decided to keep the building closed for in-person learning and go virtual through Dec. 17.

The decision was posted on the school's website:

"The Washington Island School District Board of Education made an official decision on Dec. 2, 2021, to move to a virtual learning model from Dec. 6-17, due to reported active positive COVID-19 infection. The virtual learning model was adopted to help mitigate the spread of further infection."

Although official data was not yet available, it was clear with anecdotal evidence that Island cases jumped in the first days of December, and several events, including a "meet and greet" of the new pastor at Trinity Lutheran were canceled.

It was a common refrain of people who contacted the Observer: "Everything is getting shut down" as the

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## Veterans

Waukesha, Wis., Lance Cpl. Branden Ramey of Boone, Ill., and Staff Sgt. Chad Simon of Monona, Wis. were on patrol Traumatic Brain Injury into the air by a 500-pound IED.

O'Donnell, Warns and Ramey were killed immediately. Kruchten and Simon were flown to a hospital in Baghdad. Simon died months later of his injuries. Kruchten had emergency brain surgery in Baghdad, was flown to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, and eventually to the naval hospital at Bethesda, Md.

When he woke up in Maryland he remembered nothing about the blast or the nine days following it.

Kruchten suffered a broken leg, two broken ribs, a broken shoulder, and wounds to his head, leaving him with a traumatic brain injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (commonly referred to by the acronym PTSD, though he leaves off the "D" and with it, the stigma he feels comes with the term "disorder"). After months of therapy, he was on crutches, at risk for seizures, and slowly regaining his ability to walk, talk, read and drive. He moved in with his parents in Madison and continued down the long road to where he is today: happily married for ten years to a high school friend, raising a stepson, working as an HVAC specialist, and involved in a generous handful of nonprofit organizations for veterans. Kruchten is state president of the Purple Heart Riders of Wisconsin, on the board of Hogs for Heroes, and is involved with CURE, Cover Me Veterans, and Back to Basic Training.

His road has been rough and dark at times. Kruchten went through divorce, unemployment, homelessness, and financial instability in his first few years back from service. A laminated photo of the Humvee's twisted wreckage in his wallet reminds him of how far he has come. A tattoo on his forearm bearing an acronym of his dead fellow Marines keeps him going forward, past the survivor's guilt that he says characterizes his PTS.

"Because I wasn't taken that day, because I didn't fall down, it was on me to bring into the world all the positive things that Ramey, O'Donnell, Warns, and Simon would've done on a daily basis...I use it as something to drive me. My best efforts are spent trying to help veterans."

### TBI and PTSD common among veterans

Roads like Kruchten's are distressingly common among veterans. Advances in medical technology

mean more vets are leaving the battlefield alive but are living with more serious and debilitating injuries. Kruchten is one of more than 430,000 military veterans diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury between 2000-2020, according to the CDC.

TBI is a complex diagnosis and can be difficult to treat. Headaches and migraines, dizziness, visual impairment, noise and light sensitivity, fatigue, post-traumatic epilepsy, Alzheimer's, dementia, sleep difficulties, attention deficits, inability to concentrate, depression, anxiety, aggression, irritability, and other personality changes are all possible long-term effects. Many vets who suffer from TBI also have chronic pain from additional injuries, as well as PTSD.

The federal government recognized the increase in cases of TBI among vets and commissioned the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense, and the Veterans Administration to make a report to Congress in 2013 on how to address the growing public health concern.

Veterans' mental health problems and their higher risk for suicide, divorce, substance abuse, drug overdose, homelessness, and domestic instability are well-publicized in the last two decades. The VA has made strides to improve services for veterans, including Vet Centers that specialize in mental health treatment.

Kruchten has had his own frustrations with bureaucracy. When asked if he thinks the government is doing enough for vets, he says no. He credits much of his recovery to

small non-profits like Hogs for Heroes, a family-run organization in Wisconsin that uses 100% of donations to purchase motorcycles for vets. Kruchten was the first Hog recipient in 2016. He says riding a motorcycle is his therapy and he now serves on the organization's board to choose other recipients.

Doug Hansen, who hosted Kruchten and five other military servicemen at his home on the Island this year, has lost confidence in the country's ability to deal with the crisis. Hansen is a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserves with a 24-year career. "The people in legislative positions don't understand...there is distancing going on with fewer people with military experience in legislative positions. This country is willing to

commit young people to combat and military service and they have real short memory when they come back damaged," says Hansen.

### Heroes' Hunt for Veterans

Which is why he got involved with the Heroes' Hunt for Veterans. HHV, out of Waupun, is a non-profit organization that organizes and pays for veterans to free-range hunt deer, waterfowl, and turkey in guided hunts around the state. Hansen is hosting his fifth hunt this year. He says he saw a TV program about the Wounded Warrior Project and thought "I could do that...I've been so blessed in my life: a beautiful second home, a beautiful community supportive of veterans" and he contacted HHV.

Hansen says the hunt is "the

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"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying,  
"I am the light of the world.  
Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness,  
but will have the light of life.""

John 8:12



RECALL and SHARE memories of those no longer here,  
LAUGH and LOVE with those that remain.  
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May-Oct.

*Continued from previous page*

highlight of my year.” At 71, he is one of the youngest military veterans living on the Island. Membership in the local American Legion is dwindling, mirroring membership numbers of Legions, Veterans of Foreign Wars and organizations like them across the country. “Younger vets just aren’t joiners I suppose,” muses Hansen.

Though self-isolation might be one reason, the number of active-duty service members and military veterans is just lower overall. According to Pew Research studies 7% of Americans had military service experience in 2018 versus 18% in 1980. Fewer veterans means less visibility. The average American might not know anyone with military experience personally. Hansen says “there is a big disconnect in today’s American public about what military service is about and what the people in the military do for their country.”

And the struggles they often face when they return.

“What Doug and the family members and the community has allowed to happen up here...is so great for veterans,” says Kruchten who sits in Hansen’s second floor sleeping loft surrounded by a half dozen beds and various pieces of camouflage clothing. “When guys leave the service they miss the camaraderie. They used to all live together in a barracks and now they’re all spread out.”

“Guys in the military are used to functioning as a team. You live and die as a team. This (guided hunt) offers that. The military has a culture of its own, the civilian world doesn’t understand. A little bit of what we do here is like that,” says Hansen.

Kruchten says the Island is a special place. “This is a fantastic way to really escape reality for just a little bit. Part of it is (the lack of) cell phone reception,” he laughs, “It’s a great way to physically and electronically disconnect from anything else. That is so refreshing. There’s the opportunity for us to be able to work with our demons, you know. I don’t have all the noise of my life going on...I’ve got four or five days to just be in nature, be in the moment and just relax. And if, in our non-hunting time, we work a little bit on ourselves...you know what? This is a good feeling, I want to take some of this home with me.”

While he is being interviewed, the unmistakable smell of frying tortillas mingled with men’s laughter travels upstairs from the kitchen below. “Mario’s making tacos tonight,” says Kruchten. The two nights before it was pasta, and chicken tikka masala.

Mario is Mario Herrera, a Marine Corps sergeant who was in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is his second year hunting with Hansen’s Heroes. He returned to put his formidable cooking skills to use, connect with other vets and “try to get into the will,” he says

with a sidelong glance at Hansen.

The other guys sitting around the table chuckling are Marine Sgt. Alejandro Arango, retired Air Force First Sgt. Todd Kern, and Marine Gunnery Sgts. Xuchill “Chill” Laput and Jeffrey Cheslic (both still active duty). Their demons are not in evidence as they wisecrack and talk about hanging out and hunting with each other on the Island.

Kern was in the Air Force for 26 years and says he’s still trying to figure out who he is and deal with retirement. His wife, who works for the VA in Madison, signed him up for hunts to bring him back into the veteran community. Herrera describes the community as interwoven; one hunt, or event, or fundraiser leading into another and “how you get sucked back into the military version of civilian life.”

Which is a good thing for these guys, and they speak to the benefits for veterans in general. Kern says getting back in touch with the veteran community via organizations like HHV has been important to his adjustment to retirement. “These guys, no matter what branch of service, seem to be more family to me. We all still click. We all still understand each other to a certain point. My family doesn’t understand anything. It’s not like I expected it to be. Even this weekend has been more like family than my actual blood relatives.”

“This is probably one of the most therapeutic things you can do,” says Herrera, “you’re on an Island, there’s deer everywhere, you’re with your fellow brothers...”

“Doug makes you walk five miles a day,” interrupts Laput. The table erupts in laughter.

“Ten miles!”

“No it’s seven! I checked.”

Herrera describes tracking a deer the night before and how the group clicked into using their military skill set, “almost like we were on patrol... you can’t do that with civilians... where you immediately know what the other person is doing.”

“This is a therapeutic piece of paradise, you’re surrounded by the most beautiful place in the entire state,” Herrera finishes.

Hansen would like to continue the hunt as long as he can. He thanks Island property owners who have given them permission to hunt on their land but says the increase in posted lands is becoming a problem. He hopes more people will allow access to their land. And, he hopes people will continue to host the hunt when he is no longer able to.

Mostly, he wants people to know that a good thing is happening for vets for a few days every November here and that the Island is playing a part in helping vets feel at peace, heal, and confront their demons.



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