

## Joel and Barrett

Following is Joel Hunt's personal story, in his own words:



I joined the army in 1998, motivated to make the service a 20-year career. In 2005, during my third Iraq combat deployment, I was injured by a roadside blast that left me with a severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). I was the “lucky” one – I will never forget my buddies who didn't make it home.

When I returned, I was confined to a wheelchair. My parents moved in with me as caregivers. I endured dizziness, blackouts, double vision and could not feel my legs. I was severely depressed and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I was on 15 different medications. The side effects made me slur my speech and disrupted my ability to think and concentrate. People thought I was drunk.

Prior to my injury, I did not understand the challenges that people with disabilities face. You can't truly appreciate what it's like to be disabled until your own life is affected by it. My injury changed my perspective and gave me a new outlook on life.

My parents were my biggest supporters. They constantly motivated me to get out of the house and get active. I was fortunate because a lot of soldiers didn't have any support.

In December 2008, my parents insisted I go to a ski camp in Breckenridge, Colorado, for veterans with TBI. Grudgingly I went. I felt self-conscious about my disabilities and extremely anxious about being around others who I'd never met, due to the PTSD. Within three days of learning to ski, I was carving. My instructor, a former ski racer, told me that I was doing an awesome job. When I asked him if I could become a ski racer, his reply was “No, you're too old.” Undeterred, I skied 125 days that season.



In 2009, I found the Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF). Their Operation Rebound program, for troops and first responders with permanent disabilities, provided me with the equipment and funding necessary to compete as a downhill ski racer.

By 2011, I was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> nationally and 50<sup>th</sup> in the world as an adaptive skier. Although I remain challenged by TBI, partial paralysis in my left leg and double vision, I have made great strides over the past three years. I am now only on three medications and I have become an elite ski racer.

Freedom Service Dogs (FSD) was the first organization that enabled me to get out of the house, back when I was still in my wheelchair, at an event to work on training dogs. I did this for two months while I was in a program at the VA.



In December 2011, I put in a request for a service dog. There was a point in time that my path could have led to a life in a wheelchair, in a nursing home, but my parents gave me a second chance at an active life, with my loving family. I chose Freedom Service Dogs because this organization gives rescued dogs a second chance. It's my turn to give a creature in need a purpose in life and a loving home.

At the beginning of this year, I fractured my T9. It happened at a very difficult time. My PTSD had resurfaced, my wife and I lost our second child to a miscarriage and my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Freedom Service Dogs called me soon after and said that my dog, Barrett, was ready, thanks to very generous funding from the Davignon Charitable Fund. Barrett and I bonded, but after a few weeks, my depression had turned

to despair and I had the meds in my hand – my PTSD had finally broken the camel's back. I sat on the bed, getting ready to end my life, and at that dark moment, Barrett came over to me and put a paw on my leg and looked up at me, his eyes saying "It's okay, bro, I have been there myself." That night, Barrett saved my life. PTSD can feel like drinking nine energy drinks and if you have no outlet, life can be unbearable. Freedom Service Dogs is not just about dogs helping with physical disabilities, it's about true, ongoing, freedom.

#### **Update on Joel and Barrett 12.12.12**

One month after Barrett was placed with Joel, the pair traveled all across the country on Joel's skiing adventures, from New York to Mount Hood in Oregon, then to Alaska. They both went on golfing trips to Canada, Minnesota, and New Mexico. Aside from being an avid skier, Joel is also a professional speaker and travels often for his speaking engagements. 19 flights in 6 months! Sadly, Joel's mother passed away during that time, and Joel cancelled trips to Chile and Australia to be with his family.

Joel says that Barrett is a great dog. He carries in the groceries, wakes him up if he has nightmares, braces him on the ice, and loves to run up and slide down hills in the snow. Joel has double-vision, so Barrett guides him around wherever he goes and opens and closes doors for him. He jokingly adds that Barrett can even do laundry, fold clothes and iron. As for his skiing career, Joel is now ranked number 4 in the nation as an adaptive skier.