A Network Of Hope

Sam Brown Wasn’t An Aggie, But ‘I Knew The Aggie Network Could Help Sam Brown’

BY STEPHANIE CANNON ’06

On Sept. 4, 2008, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, a tall and trim Army first lieutenant and 2006 West Point graduate named Sam Brown responded to call that a platoon was being ambushed and needed backup. As he led his platoon into the firefight, an improvised explosive device detonated under his Humvee. He was thrown, his body on fire, from the wreckage. Lieutenant Brown suffered third-degree burns over 30 percent of his body.

Brown remembers the explosion—the flash of light, agonizing pain, and being loaded onto a Black Hawk pointed in the direction of medical help. Though that’s where the memory stops. He was transported to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio in a medically induced coma.

Brown deployed with the Third Brigade, First Infantry Division, based out of Fort Hood, in a unit led by Lt. Col. Stephen Ruth ’92. After Brown was hit, Ruth was still at camp in Afghanistan, but wanted to be there for his young lieutenant.

Burns are more than a medical issue, Ruth said. Burns are even more than the pain. When you are severely burned, your life is abruptly changed, Ruth said; burns can affect your identity and personality. Brown needed encouragement, he said. Sam Brown was not an Aggie, but “I knew the Aggie Network could help Sam Brown,” Ruth said.

At this point in the surge, the Forward Operation Base where Ruth was stationed was still being put together. “We’re still living in tents with dirt floors and showers that were really turned-upside-down 5-gallon cans,” he said. Communications had yet to be set up. “I didn’t have any means of reaching out to the Aggie community. All I could do was make one phone call.”

From Afghanistan, Ruth contacted his mentor, Cliff Dugosh ’86, who lived in San Antonio near where Brown was healing, and asked him to check in on the recovering lieutenant.

“He told me that the next day was Sam’s birthday,” Dugosh remembered. “He sent me information about who Sam was and where he was, but I had no idea how bad his injuries were.”

Dugosh showed up in Brown’s room with a few gifts and one question. “If you could ask for anything for your birthday, what would it be?” Dugosh asked. When Brown requested a home-cooked meal, Dugosh returned the next day with meatloaf, cornbread and mashed potatoes. Afterward, he sat down at his computer.

He opened an email, addressed it to every Aggie he knew, and started typing the subject line. “Aggie wishes for West Pt. Grad (Pass it on!)” He wanted the Aggie Network to know about Brown’s service and heroism, and to send him letters of encouragement.

Brown didn’t expect Dugosh to
knock on his door, and he certainly didn’t expect the torrent of notes that started arriving daily. He knew Ruth was an Aggie: “Everyone knew Ruth was an Aggie,” Brown laughed. Brown first met Ruth while at West Point, where Ruth taught a leadership class. “He wasn’t even my instructor, but the instructor of my best friends,” Brown said.

Brown was drawn to Ruth’s engaging leadership. “He is probably one of the best officers I had the opportunity to know in the Army. He just really cares about the people he leads and mentors.”

Together, Ruth and Dugosh “ignited this little fire,” Brown said. “The next thing I know, I’m getting bombarded.” Letters came in from children of Aggies, current students and former students. There were drawings, well wishes and promises to pray for him. There were thank yous and get well soons and hope to hear you’re doing wells.

The encouragement helped Brown refocus his vision. “I was in physically the lowest point of my life,” Brown said. He couldn’t feed himself. He couldn’t bathe or care for his wounds on his own. “I had the functional ability of a toddler at best,” he said. And then there was the pain—“massively high levels of pain with not a great deal of relief,” he said.

The letters, “they moved the needle,” he said. “Encouragement doesn’t change pain. But it can give hope. That’s what it did for me.” In an environment where Brown had no contacts and no hope of receiving local support other than his mother who stayed in San Antonio to care for him, suddenly it all changed thanks to the Aggie Network. “There was just a ton of written correspondence and support. People came to visit me, and as I got better, they invited me to join their family in something.”

Dugosh encouraged Brown to get out in front of people again, and set him up to speak to different high schools. Cheered on by Dugosh, he attended a men’s retreat.

Aggies gave Brown “hope that things can get better and will get better,” Brown said.

After being released from the hospital, for a while Brown kept a large sack full of the several hundred letters out as a reminder. “I literally had them sitting in my living room,” he said. “It meant a lot to me.”

When skin is burned, it’s important to stay out of the sun. With all his personal belongings in Afghanistan or in a shipping container, Brown went shopping for a hat. Up on the shelf, he had options. “I thought, you know what, I’m here and these people have loved me and I want to show my support by buying that A&M hat,” he said. He still has that hat, stained on the inside from his wounds. “It symbolizes my support from your community,” he said.