

Casting into deeper waters

How a gang member from Texas came to lead groups of inner city kids and veterans on fly-fishing adventures

BY EMILY GREEN
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Chad Brown stood waist deep in the brisk current of the Clackamas River, just a few hundred yards upstream of the Estacada Bridge. On this temperate midsummer afternoon in 2010, he was casting his line for trout. As the rapids gently washed up against the sides of his waterproof waders, he contemplated what it all meant, and how to put into words the emerging endeavor that seemed to be the perfect culmination of his past 39 years.

"Soul river runs deep," he thought to himself. He had found his answer.

A few months earlier, Brown was dangerously close to taking his life with the pull of a trigger. After losing everything he had worked for as the result of his long-fought battle with PTSD – the byproduct of time served in Operation Desert Storm and Operation Restore Hope – he was ready to give up.

But then he discovered fly fishing, and that changed everything.

On this fateful day on the river, he was thinking about the future. It was there he had finally found relief from his crippling mental anguish, and he knew he could help others do the same.

Fast forward five years and today Brown is focused on raising enough funds to take a couple dozen inner city kids up to southern Alaska's picturesque Kenai Peninsula for a fly fishing adventure with a handful of war veterans.

The summer of 2015 will be his second season of connecting urban youth and veterans with nature through his favorite sport. He now operates a small, stylish fly-fishing boutique in North Portland's Kenton neighborhood, called Soul River Runs Deep, and sales from the store help support his nonprofit, Soul River Inc.

Brown says his business and nonprofit work together to sustain his peace of mind and teach others how to the same.

"It's a way of connecting to youth," Brown



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

says, "who are fighting for their lives in underserved communities, and veterans, who are fighting for their acceptance in society again after what they have come through with PTSD."



Born and raised in Texas, Brown was the product of a broken home, a reality that he says troubled him deeply. As a teenager, he joined up with the Latino gangs that hung out in his corner of Austin. He started getting into street fights and committing robberies.

A mentor from his childhood eventually stepped in and straightened him out. Capt. Freddie Maxwell with the Austin Police Department, or "Captain Maxwell" as Brown

knew him, picked him up and threw him in jail to teach him a lesson. The police officer had been his big brother in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program a few years earlier. Brown was not officially under arrest, but he got the message, and eventually finished high school and then enrolled in the Art Institute of Dallas.

"I had always been into art and design," says Brown. Despite his gang affiliations and troublesome ways, his mother had always made it a point to expose him and his younger brother to the arts, taking them to the symphony and theater, and encouraging his interest in drawing. But before Brown earned his bachelor's degree, he had to drop out for financial reasons. Out of money and out of options, he joined the U.S. Navy.

"I was actually anti-military at the time,

but I needed to survive and I didn't want to go back home," he says, "and that was really the only option that I had."

It was a decision that took him around the globe to 14 countries and into two wars. He won't go into detail about his time fighting in Somalia and Kuwait, he only says he experienced extreme environments and lost some people he really cared about.

Once discharged, he used his GI Bill funding to finish his bachelor's degree at American InterContinental University in Atlanta, Ga., and then went on to earn a graduate degree at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. From there he worked a string of prestigious jobs at various design and advertising agencies in New York City, and

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