

DEEPER WATERS, from page 4

designed shoes for Phat Farm. He eventually opened his own boutique ad agency, but he says he was becoming overwhelmed with the "hustle."

"It was crazy," he says. "I was constantly dealing with certain things mentally, but wasn't really aware of what I was dealing with, throughout this whole time."

He closed shop and took a sabbatical, hiking, hitchhiking and walking through Japan for two months. Upon his return he was offered a job as a senior designer at an ad agency in Portland.

Portland's laid-back vibe was in stark contrast to the chaotic grind of life in New York, where his day-to-day schedule didn't allow for a lot of reflection and introspection. Without the distractions of the big city, symptoms of his undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder began to surface.

"There were things happening with me, and I didn't know what was going on," he says. "It was stronger now, and it was really coming out into my work." He says he began to drink, and holding onto to advertising jobs became impossible.

"I started fighting a lot of my demons," says Brown. He was able to land jobs at three or four other Portland ad agencies, but quickly lost each one. "It was like night and day: walking in and getting a high-level job – six figures – and then the next day, I lose it. It was a mind trip. I was losing it. I started having a lot of anxiety issues, I was losing my mind, my thought process – there was times that I remember getting into my rig and, three miles from the house, I would lose my way," he remembers.

Brown had gained more than 100 pounds and was selling plasma every Tuesday on Southeast Holgate Boulevard to pay for gas. "I had lost everything. I was borderline homeless, and I was also ashamed for what had happened, because everybody from New York – my colleagues – knew me at this level," he says, raising his right hand above his head. "My ego got the best of me and I didn't go home. I fought a battle by myself."

He began to see therapists and was misdiagnosed with everything from schizophrenia to bipolar disorder, he says. He finally went to the VA where it was determined that he was most likely suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. It would be a year and a half before his paperwork would be processed and his benefits granted, a process he says was like riding a "roller coaster from hell."

"It was a terrible time in my life – it was crazy – me dodging cops left and right, trying to stay out of trouble. It was so extreme – it really wasn't that long ago – I actually had tracks from where I would give blood," he says, "I covered that up with some tats, basically because I didn't want to be reminded."



For four years, Brown hazily clawed his way through life. "I was a complete wreck," he says. "I was popping around 10 different pills a day: a couple to keep me awake, a couple to keep me from not having nightmares, a couple for anxiety, and I was taking so many I was just like a walking zombie."

But one day in 2009, a concerned



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SOUL RIVER INC.

acquaintance took Brown to Clackamette Park to go fishing. "I hooked my first fish on that same day, and I was very, very excited – I was happy," Brown says. The excitement, he says, broke through his medicated state of mind and made him feel alive.

At his next appointment at the VA, he told his doctor he wanted to take less medication and fish more. Then he did everything he could to immerse himself in his new form of therapy on the river.

He befriended several fishing guides at the now-closed Kaufman's Streamborn fly shop in Tigard. "I was like a roadie," he says, tagging along on trips with clients, soaking it all in.

"I started getting good at it, tying my own flies, building my own rods, everything started becoming my therapy, and I got better and better at it," says Brown. "And then I started showing and sharing and teaching. And that was when I got to that place – standing in the water."

In that moment five years ago on the Clackamas River, he pondered his inner conflict – from his troubled youth and time spent in battle – and he thought about how others carrying those same burdens might also find solace at the water's edge.

Around the same time the VA approved his disability benefits – with back pay. "It was an opportunity to start, and that's what I needed – a good start. I didn't want to screw it up," says Brown. "I paid the immediate stuff, took the rest and put it into my dream."

That's where those four words were put to work. Soul River Runs Deep began as an online store in 2012, and two years later, Brown opened his retail space in North Portland. It was the perfect combination of his passion for fly fishing and his knack for design. His original plan was to funnel most of the profits directly into his nonprofit, but after some friends in the entrepreneurial world convinced him that wouldn't be sustainable, he settled on 15 percent.



Above, Army veteran John Hicks (far left) and Navy veteran Mark Roberts (second from right), guide youths into the Hoh River to practice wading. At left, Army veteran Jason Small, a volunteer with Soul River Inc., shows a young man how to tie a fly for fishing.

The idea behind his nonprofit is simple, yet brilliant: Take a group of veterans and inner city kids on fishing trips together. For the veterans, many of whom suffer from PTSD, fly fishing acts as a natural "medicine for the soul," he says. For the inner city youth he brings along, interacting with nature is often a brand new and awe-inspiring experience.

He says the first time he helped guide youth on a fishing trip along the Deschutes River, "It was like witnessing the first of firsts. The first time putting on a hiking boot, the first time sleeping on the ground, the first time putting together a tent – everything was the first of first. It reminded me of my first of first, which was catching a fish, and hooting and hollering. It radiated

that and made me feel good. It's not about the end product of catching fish: It's those first of firsts that's medicine to the soul."

There's a science behind the awe youth and veterans often experience on these trips, Brown explains. In several studies conducted in recent years, psychologists have found awe, such as experienced in nature, has many positive effects on the beholder. According to a paper by psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, "Fleeting and rare, experiences of awe can change the course of a life in profound and permanent ways."

The awe of inner city youth on the river for the first time paired with the veteran's natural leadership tendencies fosters an

See DEEPER WATERS, page 7