

Pass It On®...

Finding a New Family at the Mountain Man Rendezvous.

How a Vietnam vet pulled himself out of drug addiction by going back in the past.

At the edge of Yellowstone National Park is a broad swath of golden grass that every year becomes a scene from a lifestyle that ended over a hundred years ago. It happens at the end of summer: Buckskin-clad mountain men and women gather with goods to sell, spending the warm days on hand-carved stools telling stories. Under one canvas tent, you'll find Grizz, a slightly built man with a gray mane and beard, hands thick and calloused from years of working tough leather into satchels and saddles. His blue eyes are set above cheekbones weathered by the sun and hold the secrets of a life ridden hard.

"I was in the Marines, in Vietnam," he says. But that's all he'll give away about the war. "It's not something anyone can relate to unless they were there, so I don't talk about it," he continues, protecting the brotherhood bound by common tragedy.

The leather around him has been worked and worked until it is supple, the hand-stitching perfect. There's dye in the cracks on his fingers and palms. "I got married after the war," he shares, "had a daughter." But it didn't go well. The daughter passed away — he won't say how — and he started drinking hard and using drugs to close all the wounds that had never healed.

It didn't work. His wife left, and he found himself a vagabond, the living dead cut off from society and slowly dying of survivor's guilt. That's when he stumbled on a Rendezvous in the Midwest. He found people who taught him a trade, gave him a new name, let him talk about anything but war and hurt. He started to feel at home.

The word rendezvous means a meeting place or a place of coming together. The Mountain Man Rendezvous is a kind of family gathering, and being in a family comes with its own kind of pain. A couple in the group that moved about the country had a premature baby, two-and-a-half pounds. "They named her Itty Bitty," Grizz says. "She shouldn't have lived a day."

In the anguish of uncertainty, Grizz spent his time fashioning a tiny pair of moccasins and a little medicine bag for the babe. "It's only a leather necklace," Grizz says, "until you put something sacred inside it, something that reminds you of how your life is connected to something greater."

That's when the darkness poured out of Grizz's soul. He was suddenly unburdened because his sorrow had someone else's sorrow to attach to and fly away, like the early-morning swallows looking for a new home.

Grizz smiles. Something he has done a lot of in the past 30 years. Itty Bitty has children of her own now. Something he shares in but doesn't talk about. But if you look closely, you can see the whole story in his transparent, blue eyes.

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