

OU GRAD, WAR SURVIVOR HELPS TROUBLED KIDS

Carina Belles

YOU ARE 7 YEARS OLD.

You're too young to go to school here, a place your parents keep telling you isn't really home, so you spend most of your days with your mother, playing with your toys, or watching a little TV. You wish you could go outside, but sometimes you aren't allowed. Sometimes you hear gunshots, but that's as normal as car horns to you. Today, your mother has to take you shopping because you're out of her favorite kind of bread. You're wearing a gray T-shirt, blue jeans. It's just like any other day, really. You pass the bank, a red brick building, and finally you reach the outdoor market. It's busy, bazaar-like, with all kinds of people bustling around – Hungarians, Croatians, Serbians, Americans – though that doesn't mean anything to you right now.

Then you hear the noise. The rush of air, the big bang, then nothing at all. You look down, and your shirt isn't gray anymore. It's red. You see people, parts of people, lying in a sea of blood.

Though it seems like a nightmare, this was real life for Ben Houck, a recent graduate from OU with a degree in outdoor recreation who spent the first seven years of his life growing up in the former Yugoslavia. His mother, a first generation American from Russia, worked there as a dietician, while his father worked for a West German milking equipment company that sent him to the area from a small farming town north of Cincinnati because of his background in Eastern European languages.



HOUCK WITH FELLOW COUNSELORS AT CAMP JOY. PHOTO PROVIDED.

Houck grew up during the Yugoslav Wars, a complex series of conflicts fought by warring ethnic groups who sought sovereignty from the unified state.

"It's very similar to what you hear about going on in a lot of Middle Eastern countries today, especially Iraq," Houck said. "Different ethnic groups and religious ideas cramped into one autonomous state can't really work."

The Yugoslav Wars are often referred to as the most brutal European conflict since World War II. From 1991 to 1999, the country, now known as modern Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia and Slovenia, was ripped apart by mass civilian killings and violent genocide. More than 140,000 people were killed during the conflicts, with more than 4,000,000 people displaced from their homes, according to reports from the International Center for Transitional Justice.



HOUCK CREDITS LEARNING TO HUNT AS A MAJOR FIRST STEP IN HIS HEALING PROCESS. PHOTO PROVIDED.

Despite the violence surrounding him, Houck said he didn't really understand what was going on outside his home. "It was just everyday life to me," he said. "Gunfire and explosions weren't registered. It was background noise."

Houck credits this to his age.

"Kids are very, very resilient," he said. "Their minds will come up with stories and things to make sense of it and make it all better a lot faster than an adult will. They don't have a sense of normalcy."

Houck, now a burly, bearded man of 22, said he has few concrete childhood memories, but some details of his early life — particularly certain smells — are inescapable. "I can remember the way 1993 smelled," he said. "Because 1993 was right after a big fighting year, and a lot of the country smelled like dead bodies. It's a very sweet and pungent smell that you never forget as long as you live. I don't like standing near dumpsters. It smells a lot like that."

Houck will also never forget that day he and his mother were attacked by a group of Serbians in an international market when he was just 7 years old.

A RETURN TO OHIO

He can recall certain details vividly, down to the gray T-shirt he wore, and the sound of the mortar exploding.

"I was used to hearing things go off away from me, and it's usually a loud pop and then a whistle," he said. "But when it's close to you, all you hear is a rush of air, like a flag in the wind."

Houck was hit by two pieces of shrapnel. One hit him in the pubic bone and bounced up, causing him to lose three feet of intestines. The other severed his right ear, out of which he can no longer hear.

Because they were American citizens, he and his mother, who sustained minor injuries in the attack, were quickly taken to an Italian hospital ship off the coast of the Adriatic Sea. From there, the family was flown to a United States military base in Ramstein, Germany, then back to Cincinnati. They never returned to Yugoslavia, and Houck said the incident is rarely brought up at home.

"They feel very guilty about it," he said. "It's an understood thing in our family—we don't talk about it. I'm the most comfortable with it just because it's been my whole life, but for them, it was earth-shattering."

Houck quickly adjusted to life in rural Ohio. He discovered a passion for the outdoors, a love fostered by his two grandfathers, one who grew up in rural Appalachia, and another who fought from Stalingrad to Berlin in World War II.

"Between the two of them, I learned everything there is to know about shooting, hunting, skinning, building," Houck said.

He learned to hunt at an early age, naming an 1897 7.65 mm Mauser rifle as one of his favorite "sympathy gifts" from relatives.

Houck's mother homeschooled him for a year after they returned to America, and when he entered the public school system in second grade, Houck said he had a hard time adapting. "I hated school with a fiery passion," he said. "People didn't think the same way I did. It's like being a cat in a herd of dogs."

Houck said one of the most difficult things about adjusting to life in America was breaking the Slavic accent that he developed while overseas.

"It's hard being a third-grader and sounding like the bad guy in every movie every kid has ever seen," he said.

Juliette Rocheleau, a senior English major at Ohio University and former grade school classmate of Houck's, said he had difficulty relating to other kids in school.

"He was very weird," she said. "Like, you know when you have your stereo on a little too loud and it's fuzzy because it's so loud? That was like Ben on life in general."

Children who experience violence early in life are more susceptible to anxiety, especially in social situations, according to a 2009 study in the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*. These children tend to withdraw from their peers, a feeling Houck said he can relate to.

"I didn't really have friends outside of my dog until I was 10 years old," he said. "I didn't trust people for a very long time and I still don't trust people as far as I can throw them."

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Instead of seeking relationships with his peers, Houck found solace in the woods. Part of the reason he loves hunting so much is the sense of empowerment – catharsis, almost – he gets from tracking down his prey. It helped him reconcile what happened to him in Yugoslavia, and get some of his power back.

"Being a child and being assaulted like that, it made you feel helpless," he said. "There's a feeling of inadequacy your entire life."

But it wasn't all bad for Houck as a child. His level of dedication to his passions did not go unnoticed by his peers. "Whereas everyone else was more passive in their approach, he was very aggressive and just went for it," Rocheleau said. "He was very original. I remember his science fair project, he did it with such gusto. When Ben does things he does it 100 percent, there is no hesitancy."

At 9, Houck spent the summer – his first of 13 – at Camp Joy, a recreation camp in Clarksville, Ohio for disadvantaged youth. Houck said camp was one of the few places he felt he could be himself.

"It gives you a sense of normalcy in a world of chaos," he said. "That helped me reconcile a lot of my demons. I was in the woods and I was with kids who halfway knew what I was talking about."

Houck aged out of the program at 15, but became a peer mediator, and later a camp counselor. But it wasn't until two years ago that he realized he needed to spend his life helping kids.

That summer, a particular camper stood out to Houck. A gang member. In his 15 short years he'd already seen his brother shot and killed, and his mother died in his arms. "The kid was a train wreck, but he was tough as nails," Houck said. "You never saw the kid give an inch."

On the boy's 16th birthday, Houck spent his weekly five-hour break tracking down a cheap cake mix and icing at the local Save-A-Lot, constructing a crude yet practical birthday cake so the entire cabin could celebrate together.

"He just started weeping when we put that cake down in front of him," Houck said. "He said, 'Ben, most people told me I wouldn't live to see my 16th birthday. And before now, no one ever bought me a birthday cake.' I gave a 16-year-old kid his first birthday cake, and I realized that's what I need to be doing."

Chris Austing, a friend and fellow counselor at Camp Joy who met Houck the summer before ninth grade year, said Houck's commitment to his campers is inspiring. Though the bushy beard makes him look older, Austing said Houck is just a big kid.

"He's gonna play a game with you, but he's also gonna teach you something," he said. "He doesn't like to waste time. He'll teach you all of the random things he knows."

Houck is full of fun facts. From the best animal skinning techniques to what to do in case of nuclear fallout, he's a regular survivor man, and said he loves sharing his knowledge of the outdoors with his campers. "I really enjoy seeing the kids respect the practical skills that they get from it, like how to paddle a canoe, how to start a fire, how to cook your own food," he said. "I've taught kids how to balance a checkbook. I love that you can teach them so many thousands of practical things and it makes them realize the importance of learning in school."

Houck said the boy he made the cake for will be the first in his family to graduate high school.

"I like to think that I've helped a lot of kids graduate just because I can make things make a little bit more sense," he said.

Houck said he feels his childhood was taken from him, so he shares as much as he can with his campers to try and help them grapple with their own experiences. "I talk about Bosnia quite a bit with them," he said. "It lets them know I know what they know."

Though he's become more and more willing to share his story as time passes, Houck's scars – his right ear is still visibly misshapen – are a painful reminder of his past. He's a self-described cynic, and he often laments the vulnerability of a society he sees as too complacent. "It's too gentle here," he said. "It's too stable. People here don't understand how fragile it all is."

In spite of his unease, which Houck said is a permanent consequence of the violence he witnessed, his accomplishments speak for themselves. In addition to his work with kids, he's hiked parts of the Appalachian Trail, where Austing said they were nearly mauled by a bear in the middle of the night.

"Ben woke me up," Austing said. "He just said, 'Hey, can you turn your flashlight over here?' I saw something move, and there were prints on the ground. Ben screamed, 'OH MY GOD I WAS JUST LICKED BY A BEAR.'"

The bear never turned up, but all four boys on the trip spent the rest of the night cramped in one tiny tent. The smell, Austing said, was horrible. Think unwashed teenage boy meets brawny hiker. But that's just life with Ben.

An experienced camper, Houck is also an ardent craftsman.

"We dated in seventh grade and a few years later and he told me he built a fort in the woods and named it after me," Rocheleau said. "That's just something so typical to Ben that's not normal to anyone else. It was adorable."

Though Houck said he's had many opportunities to give up, to continue the cycle of violence, he remains determined to heal.

"You can't quit," he said. "You just can't quit. As hard as it was to act normal, as hard as it was to break my old accent, as awful as it is to push things out of your head, the more you do it the easier your life gets. You teach yourself how to be normal. You teach yourself to forget. You teach yourself to call things up when you need them, but you can't dwell on it or else it will kill you. You'll die." ♦



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HOUCK (FAR LEFT) ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL WITH FRIENDS CLAY HOWARD (LEFT) AND CHRIS AUSTING (RIGHT). PHOTO PROVIDED.