

## Nature as home . . . antidote to war

by Matthew Rubenstein



Being rooted to me isn't as easy as naming a person or talking about the house where I was raised. For me, roots are both physical and blood related. From the giant oak trees penetrating the limestone foundation to the mangroves that soak their roots in the crystal clear waters of Florida Bay, my roots lie within the South Florida wilderness and the people with whom I share it. From the hiking and camping, to sight fishing and lobstering, there isn't a day that goes by that I don't drift back "home." Over my 30 years, breathtaking scenery, adrenaline-filled moments, and hard lessons learned from long tired nights have washed inside me. Along the way, I've shared those soulful saturations with the people whose passions are the same as mine, creating life-long friendships and memories.

From as long as I can remember, I have always been different. I wasn't like most kids. I didn't want to play video games; and as I got older, I didn't want to fill my nights with drinking and the club scene. I was always drawn to adventure and the outdoors, exploring the Everglades and the expanses of untouched wilderness. It's where I first learned a significant lesson in life, Respect! Like all of life, Nature deserves respect. It is delicate and needs to be taken care of—from the animals that call it home to the plants to the weather. If I take care of it, it seems to find ways to take care of me. In a time when technology has taken over, and all emotion is received in an emoji, left to decipher in an email or text, Nature is real. It teaches me to pay attention to all the little details, how to read it, and how to approach its multitude of species. In the everglades if I misjudge something or disrespect it, I will end up paying for it, for nature makes me accountable for my actions. Today, people often don't reprimand or give honest feedback for transgressions. But Nature does, if we stop to listen.

The family I have built around this outdoor haven of mine always seems to last. Many of us have some friends that come and go, but I enjoy the few

special ones, who are the staples in my life, who seem to have developed from my experiences in the “great outdoors.” From father figures, to brothers and sisters, to my love life, I have found everything I need in the outdoors.

My father left my family when I was nine years old, and my mother gave it her all. She worked hard and provided my sister and me with everything we needed. I never really had a father, but my best friend’s father was kind enough to provide me some opportunities and life lessons in the outdoors, experiences that led me to become bonded with animals, trees, plants, water, rocks, other people who share the same values. The bonds of Nature and of those human relationships inextricably bound me to a joy and sometimes to a solitude that keeps me alive.

The roots of the outdoors has such a deep hold on me; I have often turned to it for healing. At the age of 19, I joined the Army and got the opportunity to travel and see the world. Yet I was also deployed to Afghanistan, to an area where I conducted mission after mission to ensure, the Army claims, that our freedoms are kept, and that my family never has to worry about terror stepping foot on our soil. With this responsibility came great sacrifice, and the first place I went each time I came home was straight back where I really am free, the natural world.

While deployed in Afghanistan, I lost my best friend. Every time we had shared some “down time” together, we had shared stories of hunting and fishing. It was our way to escape and dream of the days when we would be back home and wake up to the fall breezes and the crisp air—all the signs that hunting season would be upon us once again. We shared stories and pictures and planned future trips. Neither one of us knew that our last evening together would be his last evening. I longed then for those Everglades, for them to soothe my soul.

Every year there will be a day in a hunt when I just sit back and reflect on the days my friend, my comrade in arms, and I shared together. Each memory brings me a desire to be living my life to his expectations. And I reach back to family and the outdoors. They are the constant in my healing process—a healing demanded by war, its memories, its losses, and its aftermath. And anytime I need to step back and slow things down, and see the world from a different perspective, I go straight back to my roots.

Those roots ground me in what matters most in life. It’s often easy to get caught up in day to day struggles, and forget to slow down and live. Working, seeking a degree, taking care of relationships—I can sometimes lose my footing, shake my roots. Growing up in nature helps me see that as fast as we come into this world, we can just as easily be removed from it. I also learned that lesson serving in Afghanistan. We can spend most of our time trying to

hide from life, yet in reality life, both vicious and gentle, will find us. Neither does Nature hide reality. If observed closely, listened to attentively, it can offer wisdom, solace, terror, and joy. Hopefully, when it is my time to go, I can retreat back to my roots and watch the sun set for the last time. But if I can't, like most of us, I hope I will have lived my life to the fullest and will take my last breath with no regrets.