

## Moving a Divided Nation Forward, Two Wheels at a Time



Woodbury, New York, January 15<sup>th</sup> – “Washington is not going to fix America; America is going to fix America,” retired colonel Christopher Holshek concluded in his National Service Ride [project video](#). “People here have more power to change their country than they may otherwise believe,” he went on in a *Huffington Post* [article](#). “The sooner enough of us act upon the common sense notion that we do better for ourselves when we do better for each other, the country again moves forward in meaningful way.”

Welcome news in a highly divided nation going through unusually uncertain times.

Coming to that realization doesn’t come from talk shows, news programs, tweets, or social media posts. It comes through “real, human connectivity in an alienated, narcissistic, and atomized society.” For this Army Civil Affairs veteran, at least, this epiphany began with a motorcycle ride.

His thirty-year career ending, Holshek took off on his Harley-Davidson for an 8,000 mile adventure across the United States. Inspired by Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*, he went out to find out what it means to be an American in today’s world, soon finding himself on a mental and spiritual journey of rediscovery. “When I took a look at the country I served to mark my military retirement in 2010, I came to realize that the future of our nation constantly depends on each one of us, in every generation, taking our own journey to find out who we are, what we’re about, and what we’re willing to do to face the challenges of our times. So, after some prompting, I wrote the book.”

Far more than a motorcycle diary, [\*Travels with Harley – Journeys in Search of Personal and National Identity\*](#) is a stirring memoir that retired Marine General and new Secretary of Defense James Mattis called “an antidote to pessimism and a reminder of what makes life worth living.” Only through service to others, it concludes, can Americans of all ages find their identity by stepping up to national and global citizenship, starting in their own communities.

As a divided nation ponders its future and looks to find its way in the aftermath of a pivotal election, this positive and empowering message couldn’t be better timed or more needed. *Travels with Harley*, former Center for a New American Security executive vice president Kristen Lord, is “a must-read for those thinking about the future direction of America and what they can do about it.”

But writing the book wasn’t enough. The native of New York’s Lower Hudson Valley is taking its timely and broad-based message on the road. The [National Service Ride](#) leverages motorcycling’s appeal to freedom, adventure, and moving forward to promote citizenship and service, starting right at home.

“When we become better citizens, we become a better country – because, when you serve your community, you serve your country,” Holshek tells his audiences. “It doesn’t require a uniform.”

Funded only through book sales, the National Service Ride is an adaptable platform for discussions at schools and other places on service learning, organized between rider clubs and service organizations in communities around the country. Interactive discussions across generational and societal lines aim to help America’s youth see the meaning and value of helping themselves best by helping others, showing them pathways to local, national, international service learning. Encouraging and empowering young people to do good work and help solve common problems, starting in their own communities, also helps them improve their qualifications for personal advancement, building leadership, teambuilding and other interpersonal skills vital to economic livelihood as well as social viability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A national narrative of service that transcends differences fosters a collaborative mindset, he contends, establishing empathy for real common ground for much-needed civil dialogue on matters inexplicable in 140 characters. Service to others helps develop the internal moral GPS each of us needs to navigate a complex, dynamically interconnected, and information overloaded world, and discern fact from fiction.

In that way, it would help make the country less vulnerable to mass media manipulation and the politics of fear and ignorance played out daily in the obsessive reality show of terrorism, distrust of police and other forms of government. Moreover, it closes numerous [engagement gaps](#) and combats a culture of fear and unfounded entitlement, narcissism, and impunity – and the isolation on many levels that goes with it.

“America cannot long remain the land of the free if it’s no longer the home of the brave,” he warns. Beyond promoting an empowering sense of national unity, the Ride also looks to help pass the baton of generational leadership. The initiative’s locally organized events to promote ongoing dialogue between service veterans from many walks of life who are looking for ways to give back and youth looking for ways to pay it forward. At high schools, colleges, and other places, local service-oriented motorcycle clubs and community, public, and national service organizations are facilitating conversations across generational and societal lines about citizenship and service – all enhanced and extended by mass and social media.

Besides revitalizing citizenship along the lines of thinking globally and acting locally, the project helps close civil-military gaps. Each event starts with a “Mindful Moment of Gratitude,” courtesy of [Armor Down](#), in which the audience reads the names of local veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice since 9/11, in order to connect citizens with soldiers and create a more universal sense of service and sacrifice.

“If civilians truly wish to honor veterans, police, firefighters, first responders and others in uniform that put their lives on the line on their behalf, then they should strive to make this [a country worth the sacrifice](#) of those they emulate much less than they admire. They need not go far, for there are myriad ways to become citizens as responsible to neighbors as to nation – patriotism being something you do and not just say.”

The reaching out goes both ways, he emphasizes. Uniformed veterans in particular have a critical role to play. “Our mission,’ I tell other veterans sharing a privileged place of veneration, ‘is not complete until we’ve explained to our youth what service and sacrifice has meant to us. What they do with our hard-earned wisdom is up to them, but this much at least we owe them.”

Motorcycle clubs like the Harley Owners Group, American Motorcyclists Association, the Blue Knights International, and the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars Riders Clubs have high numbers of military, police, and other service veterans to provide role models and mentors in every town and city. The idea is for them to come roaring into schools and lend their considerable social capital to kick start an hour or so long conversation about what citizenship and service mean to each and all of us, then let the students themselves find motivation among themselves and learn more from the service organizations about how and where they can fit in – after school, over the summer, or after graduation.

To test and refine his concept and get the wheels rolling, Holshek made several appearances in 2016. After appearing at schools in New York and New Jersey in the spring, he visited others in Maryland, Virginia, and Georgia, including Kennesaw State University, where he opened a discussion on building peace locally and globally co-hosted by the [United Nations Association](#) and [TRENDS Global](#).

Since then, his book has become a student text for at least two classes there. In nearby Clarkston, a major refugee resettlement hub in metropolitan Atlanta, he presented at a Career & Education Fair with [Refuge Coffee](#) and other community service initiatives. “I got to see America at its best,” he observed.

Developed in consultation with TRENDS Global, retired General Stanley McChrystal's [Service Year Alliance](#), the [Alliance for Peacebuilding](#), [GoodWorld](#), the [Freedoms Foundation of Valley Forge](#), and others, the project's platform enables the participation of a galaxy of service-oriented organizations like [AmeriCorps](#), [Lion's Club](#) and [Rotary International](#) at the national level along with many others at the local level that can provide pathways to service learning for youth.

For these like-minded groups, the Ride provides an informal thematic coordinating platform that enables them to more closely leverage each other on events and initiatives in their own areas independently – from the bottom up rather than the top down. It also extends their own platforms and initiatives in a unique and highly visible way – helping to boost awareness, membership, volunteerism, and fundraising.

Holshek thinks his message – and his initiative – can gain traction with most Americans regardless of political or social following. “This is going to be as big as people want it to be,” he adds. “After all, America is in and of itself a composite of individual journeys. We’ll start off in the hundreds, perhaps the thousands – and see how big a dent we can make. And help put the *Unum* back in *e pluribus Unum*.”

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Find out more at [www.nationalserviceride.net](http://www.nationalserviceride.net) and through associated social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, LinkedIn; hash tags:

#TravelswithHarley and #NationalServiceRide.

To arrange an interview, send a message to [nationalserviceride@gmail.com](mailto:nationalserviceride@gmail.com).

*Travels with Harley* is available in print and electronic format through most major and independent book distributors online as well as directly from the publisher, Inkshares.com. Book reviews are most welcome.