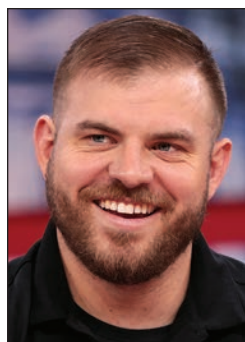


## Tough as They Come

An Interview with Travis Mills, Co-Founder, Travis Mills Foundation

**EDITORS' NOTE** Retired United States Army Staff Sergeant Travis Mills of the 82nd Airborne is a recalibrated warrior, motivational speaker, author and an advocate for veterans and amputees. His New York Times best-selling memoir, *Tough as They Come*, is currently available on sale in bookstores everywhere. Despite losing portions of both arms and legs from an IED while on active duty in Afghanistan, Mills continues to overcome life's challenges, breaking physical barriers and defying odds. He lives by his motto: "Never give up. Never quit." In September 2013, Mills and his wife, Kelsey, founded the Travis Mills Foundation, a nonprofit organization formed to benefit and assist post-9/11 veterans who have been injured in active duty or as a result of their service to the nation. The veteran and their families receive an all-inclusive, all-expenses paid, barrier-free vacation to Maine where they participate in adaptive activities, bond with other veteran families, and enjoy much-needed rest and relaxation in Maine's great outdoors.



Travis Mills

**You were critically injured on your third tour of duty in Afghanistan in 2012. How did you find the courage and strength to overcome your injuries and create a path to recovery?**

At first, I didn't have that courage and strength. To be honest, I was ready to end my life. How could I burden my wife and daughter with taking care of me? There was a moment there where I felt sorry for myself. But I snapped out of it. Other guys died over there; I lived. So, who was I to throw away this

life? And the doctors and the medics; they gave it their all, so I had to, too. And finally, there was my wife, Kelsey – we had long lives to live together. She made it clear that she was just as much in love with my recalibrated self as she had been with the original model. If she was ready to double-down and stand by me, I could step

up, too. Then, each little victory in my recovery gave me hope for the next one. I think that's something about resilience: there are moments when you have doubts, when you don't think you can make it. But you can climb those mountains and get over the top. As I went through operations and physical therapy. I started to see that this could all work out, after all. I just had to keep pushing. Sometimes you need to measure progress in baby steps, but each step you take means you can take another one, and another one after that.

**In 2013, you and wife, Kelsey, founded the Travis Mills Foundation. What was your vision for creating the Foundation and how do you define its mission?**

As I said, there was a moment early on when I felt pretty sorry for myself. Honestly, I had no idea about the resources and treatments that were available to me. I also didn't know how changes could be made to my house

**FOUNDATION BRIEF** The Travis Mills Foundation ([travismills.org](http://travismills.org)) supports recalibrated veterans and their families through long-term programs that help these heroic men and women overcome physical obstacles, strengthen their families, and provide well-deserved rest and relaxation.

**What interested you in military service and will you discuss your military journey?**

The attack on our nation on September 11, 2001, made me think of ways I could serve my country, even though I was too young at the time to join the military. At the same time, I'd always been interested in military history and war movies. Eventually, I decided that I wasn't quite cut out for college, so this just seemed like a perfect fit. I was proud to put on that uniform. I was proud to serve my country. But then when I was in combat, I suddenly had a new priority – the soldier to my left, and the soldier to my right. Taking care of my guys became my main daily motivation when I was overseas and in harm's way.



Staff Sergeant Travis Mills while deployed with the 82nd Airborne



**“I think that’s something about resilience: there are moments when you have doubts, when you don’t think you can make it. But you can climb those mountains and get over the top.”**

that would accommodate the new me. And I certainly didn’t realize, at least not right away, all the physical activities that I could still enjoy. Kelsey and I realized that if I didn’t know it, well, there had to be lots of other guys out there just like me. They needed a week away in the country with their families just as I did, in a place designed just for them, so they could see that even with disabilities we can do a whole lot of stuff we thought we couldn’t.

**What interested you in writing the book, *Tough As They Come*, and what are the keys messages you wanted to convey in the book?**

It’s similar to my reasons for starting the foundation with Kelsey. Why go through all this and learn all these lessons, and realize I cannot only survive, but thrive, if I can’t share that knowledge, if I can’t use my experience to help others? The message is simple: you can do it if I did. I’ve been there – I was down, I was ready to



*Travis Mills honored in Times Square following his 10th Alive Day, 2022*



let go – man, I’m glad I didn’t. Look how much I have now. Honestly, I don’t think of myself as inspiring – I did what I had to do to overcome a big challenge. But if I can inspire someone to get up off his or her back and live a full life, well, then, ok – I’m happy to inspire you.

**You live by the motto, “Never give up. Never quit.” Where did you develop your resilience, and do you feel that resilience can be taught?**

You know who’s resilient? Children. So many children tragically lose a parent or witness some other trauma, and their natural instinct is to soldier on, to make the best of it. They overcome incredible challenges without even realizing they are challenges. I think as we get older we think too much, we let our intellectual doubts overcome us. Am I more resilient than the next guy? I don’t know. I did what I had to do. I bet the next guy can be as resilient as I am, but he must know that there’s a happy outcome, a light at the end of the tunnel. And that’s how it can be taught: by example, by demonstrating that if we just stick to it, no matter how down we may feel, we can get there.



*Travis Mills at the Travis Mills Foundation Wellness Center in Maine*

**What inspired you to become an entrepreneur?**

It felt like the logical next step. Also, I can’t stand still. I didn’t want to be a burden on my wife and kids and, thanks to the efforts of battlefield modern medicine saving my life, I feel like every day is a gift and I want to make the most of it. Why not use my experience and all I’ve learned to help create businesses that will not only make money, but will make the world a better place in the process? First, I opened Lakeside Lodge & Marina in East Winthrop, Maine, which we followed last year with a restaurant, The White Duck Brew Pub, which is adjacent to the Marina. My latest project is Rebel for Good, a clothing line brand that supports the Travis Mills Foundation and like-minded veterans and first responder foundations. The brand’s mission is to promote a movement I’m passionate about, one that unites us to fight for worthwhile causes, instead of fighting each other. For all the setbacks and challenges, I am so grateful for being an American and being able to bring together so many from such different backgrounds by finding common ground. Over the years, politics has driven us apart – now it is time to join together, which is how we sustain our freedom, democracy and nation.

We aren’t just making really good products – we’re making really good things happen with a line of products that gives back to causes we can all believe in, helping those who helped others. It is easy to stand on the sidelines and complain. You’re expected to pick a side and stop listening. Truthfully, it’s more badass to stand up and be good. ●