



The Hicks Family — Sharing Strength with Others

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Angela Mia Photography & Contributed by The Hicks Family

Macoy Austin Daniel Hicks wanted to see you smile. He was the type of guy that would always look out for you and make sure you were okay. His energy was contagious, and his smile could brighten even the darkest places. “Growing up, Macoy was a lot like a pinball machine with eight balls all going at the same time,” says his dad, Michael Hicks. “To say he was full of energy wouldn’t do it justice. One thing is for sure, he was a happy child. His smile was infectious. As he got older, he found his niche as ‘Goofball.’ He loved to make people smile or laugh even if it was at his own expense. When everyone else was like, ‘I am not doing that,’ he was like, ‘I’ll do that and put a cherry on top.’ He was fearless!”

It wasn’t just his family he made laugh either. Sometimes, it was a whole roomful of people he didn’t even know. While on a family cruise, the Hicks were watching a comedian performing animal impressions. Knowing Macoy was a master at primate impressions, the Hicks tried to direct the comedian’s attention to Macoy. “Macoy did his monkey/gorilla noises for the comedian and made a packed room of people laugh hysterically,” remembers his sister, Sienna (20). “If you closed your eyes and listened, you would think there was an actual primate in the room. It was amazing!”

Middle school was rough for Macoy, though, as he dealt with a lot of bullying both from his classmates as well as a tenured teacher. In high school, he stood up for himself, then began sticking up for the little guys. If someone was being wronged, he wanted to make it right the best he could.

That feeling of wanting to help factored into his decision to join the military. He became an active duty US Navy sailor. His first duty station was with the Ceremonial Guard at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC, helping to bury the soldiers and families that came in each day before taking his post stationed on the USS Nimitz in Bremerton, WA. While visiting some friends in New York City on a leave, he took a bicycle ride through Central Park. An accident sent him flying over the handlebars, hitting his head and ending up with a Traumatic Brain Injury. Things started to change as the effects from that injury never completely went away. Mixed with his PTSD and seeing the constant stream of young soldiers buried every day, it all became too much to bear. Macoy lost his battle when he took his own life on February 11, 2019 at 20 years old.

“We were in such a fog that doing even the littlest things were monumental tasks,” said the Hicks. “Luckily, we have had an amazing support system during these difficult times. Our friends and family have really rallied beside us. Providing meals, cleaning the house, stopping by for hugs and to say hi. Without their support, we probably would not have survived the first few months following the loss of Macoy. It was surreal, the world kept spinning despite every aspect of our lives having been shattered and frozen in time.”

Macoy’s mom, Jolee, found painting to be therapeutic, so she attended an event with the women from their church at a nearby pottery shop, Piece d’Occasion, in Loudonville. The event sparked

an idea, and afterwards, Jolee asked one of Macoy's shipmates what she thought was something every sailor wants or needs. Without hesitation, his shipmate replied, "A hug!"

Working with Heather Rae, owner of Piece d'Occasion, they created the HicksStrong Hug Mugs. Each mug is hand-painted by a volunteer, making them all unique. The mugs are then shipped out to our military members as a way to give them all a hug and to show our support. The Hicks' non-profit, HicksStrong Inc., had been born, and they were on a mission to save military lives.

America loses over 22 veterans to suicide every day, which equals to about 8,030 lives a year. That's a huge problem, and HicksStrong wants to be a part of the solution. In addition to their Hug Mugs, HicksStrong also offers therapy, linking military members with qualified, licensed, confidential counselors via telehealth so they can get the help they need, when they need it, no matter where they are, without having to worry about any information getting back to their superiors. "Our therapists provide the much-needed outlet for our military members as well as the tools to manage the difficulties they are facing. We are stronger together!" says Jolee.

The community can help too. Connecting with HicksStrong and spreading the word with others is a great start. The group uses funds received from donations to provide the therapy, and volunteers assist with the mailing, logistics and creating mugs. It's also important for community members to help the cause by breaking down the stigmas surrounding mental health. "Reach out to your military friends, both active and veteran, and remind them you care about them," says Jolee. "Get the word out there. Let them know there are resources out there for them, like HicksStrong. Even talking about these things with friends and family that are not in the military can help to end the stigma of mental illness as a whole. Therapy is not a bad thing. It is not weak, or anything like that. In fact, it is the opposite. It shows strength and courage to ask for help and to work hard to get better. Everyone needs someone to listen. It's okay to need someone to talk to. We all need a shoulder to cry on sometimes."

It doesn't have to be a heavy conversation to stay connected to your military friends. What's important is to be intentional about staying connected. Give them a call or write a letter to just say hello and catch up. Remind them they are not alone and that you care about them.

Local businesses like Piece d'Occasion and Frontline Candles, who donate a portion of all their sales to HicksStrong, have rallied behind the HicksStrong mission, and there are always ways for new businesses to help support the mission or to become a sponsor.

Jolee and Michael were high school sweethearts and moved to the Capital Region in 2006 when Michael accepted a job at GE. He is now an application engineer at Audio-Video Corporation, one of the area's largest commercial A/V integrators. Jolee is the President and Co-Founder of HicksStrong but does most of her work from home since she is disabled due to multiple autoimmune diseases that require her to rest often. "It's a daily personal struggle for sure," she says. "I have so much I want to do. Housework, cooking, HicksStrong. My mind says go, go, go, yet my body says no, no, NOPE!" In the past, she has been completely bedridden, but now she is able to do some basic things like showering and dressing on her own, and that's a major win. Michael and Sienna are a huge help, and with their support, Jolee is able to make living with these diseases look "easy," but that is just a cover. Since others cannot often "see" the effects of autoimmune diseases, many patients suffer in silence, and the world has no idea how hard even the simplest of tasks can be. "There is no possible way I would be able to make this look as easy as I do without Michael and Sienna," says Jolee. "Michael works full time, Sienna is a full-time student, they both do work at HicksStrong, and they are both caregivers to me. They are hands down amazing!"

Sienna is now attending HVCC for political science. Like her brother, she wants to help other people and is hoping to contribute to a positive change in the world after she graduates. She wants to offer a voice to all the marginalized communities in



our country and to bring about a sense of equity within our flawed system by reevaluating how the system is run. "I believe we can change a lot more than we think we can," she says. "We believe we are so insignificant and so small that we can't change the world, but that is so far from the truth. Like my mom says, 'together we are stronger,' and we could do so much more, so much better. We cannot sit back and tolerate intolerance. It's our time to stand up and fight for what is right. It is *my* time to stand up and fight for what is right. I will do anything and everything in my power to get truth, justice and love to spread like a wildfire in this world. I want to be part of that change. I'd like to see it come to fruition, for the sake of future generations."

The Hicks family enjoys spending time at home, playing games, watching movies, working on Hug Mugs, reading and helping those in need. They also love to travel. Puerto Rico has been their favorite trip so far. Sienna also had a memorable trip with her grandmother (Abuela) and aunt (Tia) & uncle (Tio), traveling around Cape Horn on a cruise.



This June, their family will be receiving an Honor and Remember flag for Macoy, and the memories are indeed so sweet. "Macoy always knew how to cheer me up when I needed it," says Sienna. "I could always go to him for a bear hug and always ended up having to punch him to stop squeezing the life out of me. The last time I saw him in person, just before getting on my plane, he ran through security as fast as possible to give me a hug. I was the last person to get on the plane, they let me wait just a few minutes to get my hug, and I got it."

The Hicks family will continue to fight in his honor to help as many veterans as they can and are looking forward to adding new events once the pandemic eases and it is safe to do so.

"We care about our military members. They deserve long, happy lives. Their lights shouldn't be dimmed by their military experiences. It should be fueled! Our military members deserve better. We are trying to be a part of that better."

For more information about HicksStrong, visit www.hicksstrong.org.

