

# HANDMADE HOLIDAYS

JEWELRY MADE BY LOCAL ARTISTS COULD BE THE PERFECT GIFT THIS HOLIDAY SEASON, LIFE

# The Forum

OF FARGO - MOORHEAD



LATE EDITION

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## UND, NDSU to try again for \$100M from Legacy Fund

### Bresciani, Wynne lay out new plan to secure funding for research

By April Baumgarten

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GRAND FORKS — Higher education leaders will again ask the North Dakota Legislature to use \$100 million from the Legacy Fund to fuel research at the state's two flagship institutions, but other public institutes may see money as well if the proposal succeeds.

In a three-page document obtained Thursday, Nov. 14, by The Forum, North Dakota State University President Dean Bresciani and University of North Dakota interim President Joshua Wynne laid out their proposal to use money from interest earned on the Legacy Fund's \$6.36 billion. The requested amount is the same Bresciani and former UND President Mark Kennedy wanted for the 2019-20 biennium.

"The commendable definition of a 'legacy fund' is and should be a resource that creates and provides ongoing return on investment of those funds," Wynne and Bresciani said in their proposal. "Doing so through the state's two research universities would catalyze applied research in a manner that to date ... has been beyond their means but is common elsewhere in the country."

Bresciani noted the proposal Wednesday, Nov. 13, to the research committee for the State Board of Higher Education, which is reviewing its duties and a tentative timeline to submit research initiative proposals in the 2021-22 legislative session. The committee wants to develop those proposals by February, according to a draft timeline.

Bresciani and Wynne have tweaked the proposal they pitched across North Dakota over the last year. UND and NDSU would have split \$50 million for each year of the 2019-20 biennium, but in a 43-4 vote, the state Senate capped the total fund for those two years at \$45 million. The House rejected the initiative 62-30.

Some legislators appeared to support the research but opposed the bill, saying there are state funds that already go into research. But Bresciani seemed confident about the push for the initiative this time around.

"If it got close last time, boy, this one, there's something pretty optimistic about it," Bresciani said.

The goal is to obtain dollars from the Legacy Fund to spur research into economic diversification in the state, as well as investigate technological advancements for the agriculture and energy sectors, with the opportunity to match those funds with donations from private sources when possible, according to the proposal.

"With some very important tweaks that Dr. Wynne and I have put into it this

## 'A war in your own head'



David Samson / The Forum

At his home in Dwight, Nathan Griffin holds a photo of himself as a North Dakota Army National Guardsman from a decade ago. He almost took his own life after returning from his deployment to Iraq.

## BREAKING THE SILENCE

To raise awareness and inspire hope, The Forum is running a five-part series on the issue of suicide in the Fargo-Moorhead region and taking an in-depth look at some of the groups it's acutely affected.

- PART 1 Overview
- PART 2 Military veterans
- PART 3 LGBTQ community
- PART 4 Middle-aged white men
- PART 5 Native Americans

### VETERANS IN CRISIS

Military veterans in crisis can call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and press 1. Chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/get-help/](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net/get-help/) chat or text to 838255.

## ND soldier who reached the brink of suicide spreads his message to other vets

By Robin Huebner

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DWIGHT, N.D.

The random thought that popped into Sgt. Nathan Griffin's head that night wasn't one he'd pondered before, but it ended up saving his life.

Then 22, the North Dakota Army National Guardsman had been experiencing nightmares and high anxiety since his return from serving in Iraq. Griffin was living hundreds of miles away from his family. He was drinking alcohol from morning until night, for days on end.

At his breaking point, he put a loaded pistol to his head. Suddenly, came that thought — how selfish are you?

He broke down, crying. "I'm not a selfish guy, so it really bugged me," Griffin said.

He recently shared those dark moments, and how he's managed to get past them, at the Dwight, N.D., home where he now lives with his fiancée, Alicia Kania, and 8-year-old son Liam.

Others like Griffin haven't been as fortunate.

Military veterans die by suicide at a higher rate than the general population,

according to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs statistics.

About 30 of every 100,000 U.S. veterans took their own lives in 2016, compared with about 17 of every 100,000 members of the general population.

Griffin, now 33, is still in the Guard, and works as a Richland County sheriff's deputy, volunteer firefighter and part-time police officer at the North Dakota State College of Science in Wahpeton.

He considers the pistol he once loathed an important reminder of truly how far he's come.

### Vets flagged for high risk

A total of 6,079 U.S. veterans ended their own lives in 2016, the most recent year for which statistics are available, up from 5,797 in 2005.

In this region, however, veteran suicide numbers fluctuated from 2005 to 2016, showing no obvious trends.

In North Dakota, over that period, veteran suicides ranged from fewer than 10 per year to as many as 22 per year. In Minnesota, the number of veteran suicides ranged from a low of 77 to a high of 112.

VETERANS: Page A3

## INSIDE TODAY'S FORUM



**BUSINESS:**  
Downtown Fargo boutique prepares to close after over 30 years.  
**PAGE A4**

## New federal judge stays committed to family farm

### Like many, Welte working to get in crops

By Ann Bailey  
Forum News Service

NORTHWOOD, N.D. — Ice-encrusted soybeans fly over the combine hopper and skitter across the frozen ground as Peter Welte readies the com-

bine to harvest his crop.

Chopping iced-in soybeans off the machine's sensor plate along with fueling up the combine with cold-thickened diesel fuel that flows into the combine at a snail's

pace are irritations that have come with the 2019 harvest season. Welte's soybean harvest, like that of other farmers across eastern North Dakota,

**JUDGE:** Page A5

### Today's weather



Light wintry mix



Details, D4

Classifieds .....	C4-8
Comics .....	B3
Life .....	B1
Obituaries .....	A6
Opinion .....	A7
Sports .....	D1



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## VETERANS

From Page A1

The Fargo VA Medical Center has made suicide prevention among its top priorities. Anyone calling the facility immediately hears a voice message steering them to a veterans crisis line if they're having thoughts of suicide.

Angela Collins, the Fargo VA's associate chief of staff for mental health, said staff aims to identify veterans at risk for suicide early on. Currently, the facility has put high-risk suicide flags on about 70 veterans in its "catchment" area, which includes most of North Dakota and 17 counties in northwest Minnesota, extending from Traverse County to Lake of the Woods County.

The VA follows those veterans more closely, and the high-risk flag will show up on their medical record, whenever and wherever they seek treatment, Collins said.

"We review all of these flags on a very regular basis to ensure that they're still warranted. We want them to mean something," she said.

### Sniper fire and ambushes

Griffin was adopted and has seven siblings. He grew up in Richland County in the tiny town of Dwight, about 10 miles northwest of Wahpeton, where he attended school.

His interest in the military was fueled by watching the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, unfold on a classroom television. "I think that really lit a fire deep down inside where, I wanted to do something not just for my community, I wanted to do something bigger," Griffin said.

After graduating high school in 2006, he joined the North Dakota Army National Guard. In early 2008, he deployed to Iraq as part of the 191st Military Police Company of Fargo. The unit's mission was to train Iraqi police, conduct patrols, gather intelligence and search roads and vehicles for improvised explosive devices.

Shortly after they arrived, a rocket attack struck a base in Sadr City. "That kind of shook me a little bit, like 'Oh, this is real,'" Griffin said.

The unit dealt with sniper fire and several ambushes.

Griffin's job as a driver was filled with nervous and adrenaline-filled moments. By design, it meant he couldn't help fellow soldiers in a skirmish, but had to stay with the vehicle, making sure it and the convoy remained safe.

"You feel helpless and hopeless and powerless," Griffin said.

Another incident involved gunfire in the distance, followed minutes later by Iraqi children running by, carrying limp, lifeless bodies of other kids. The soldiers were trained not to intervene, in order to protect their own safety in case it was a trap.

After that, Griffin had a recurring nightmare where he's standing on a riverbank, watching a river of bodies flowing past him.

### Nightmares etched in his mind

Griffin knows the situation could have been much worse, and that others have experienced far worse. There were injuries and close calls, but no members of that North Dakota unit lost their lives in Iraq.

Still, after returning home, he had vivid nightmares so often, they became etched in his brain, like memories.

He said he tried to talk



David Samson / The Forum

Nathan Griffin spends time with his son, Liam, and dogs at his home in Dwight, N.D.

with family members and friends about what he'd been through, but didn't feel understood. He tried dealing with the nightmares and other emotional baggage by secluding himself and drinking alcohol.

Griffin made a rash decision to move to Iowa with a friend, thinking it could give him a fresh start. He didn't have a job or a place to live, so he slept on the floor of a storage shed for a time.

"I was a shut-in — played video games or watched movies. And I'd drink all day, and then I'd go to the bar at night," Griffin said.

During this period, he was still driving back and forth to North Dakota once a month to take part in weekend drills with the Guard — the only setting in which he felt normal.

He shared his thoughts about suicide with a fellow soldier, who he said told him to just not think about such things. He also called a military suicide hotline a few times, but said he never got through.

"I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late," Griffin said.

### 'What changed my life'

Griffin said the night he almost took his own life was like any other, at first.

He was alone, drunk and feeling exhausted — mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. "You just want it all to end," he said.

He called the military suicide hotline, but hung up after waiting on hold for 45 minutes.

On impulse, Griffin grabbed a loaded pistol he kept by his bed. He raised it to the side of his head, and then that random thought struck him, "How selfish are you?"

He thought about fellow service members who'd lost their lives serving their country. "And I'm going to do this? How is this honoring them?" he wondered.

He set the gun down and started bawling.

"I am selfish. That's the answer to my question that I've been asking myself for months. And that's what changed my life," Griffin said.

He passed out, woke up the next day and started planning a better path.

### The more you talk, the better it gets'

One of the first things Griffin did was to get himself a dog, which gave him a sense of purpose. He also asked a friend to take his gun for a while.

A wise move, since 67% of veterans who die by

suicide use a gun, and 90% of people who use a gun in a suicide attempt will die, said Tammy Monsebroten, coordinator of the Fargo VA's suicide prevention program.

The VA provides free cable gun locks to veterans, and encourages veterans who are at risk for suicide to put time and distance between themselves and a gun, Monsebroten said. "If we can decrease that opportunity for somebody to chose a firearm for suicide, we can decrease the amount of deaths we have," she said.

In addition to finding a new home for his gun, Griffin tried to cut back on alcohol consumption and got a job driving a semi. But it wasn't a straight line of improvement, by any means.

With long hours on the road as a truck driver, he had all the time in the world to think. It made his anxiety worse, and the bad things that happened in Iraq began playing like a loop in his head.

He'd be driving and, a few hours later, realize he was in a different state, without remembering how he got there. "You're fighting a war in your own head," Griffin said. "It's just wave after wave after wave, just crashing down on you."

Sharing his experiences, in both individual and group therapy, ended up making the biggest difference.

"The more you talk about it, the better it gets. And that's the truth," he said.

### Tools for prevention

The Fargo VA has gone from having one full-time suicide prevention coordinator about a dozen years ago to four full-time employees tasked with ensuring that veterans at risk for suicide get "enhanced care," Monsebroten said.

Veterans might be screened for that risk when they first arrive for primary care or for their compensation and pension exam.

Because some veterans at risk of suicide are not enrolled in the VA health care system, Monsebroten said the VA tries to seek out their friends, family members, churches and employers to be on the lookout for warning signs.

A veteran's highest risk for suicide is in the 90 days or so after their military discharge, she said. Some, like Griffin, struggle to readjust to civilian life.

After that, suicide risk decreases until about 25 years after discharge, then the risk begins to increase

again, Monsebroten said. Her theory is that when people move into retirement, they have more time to think about problems they were able to fend off while raising children and working.

She encourages those at risk to have a safety plan that includes emergency phone numbers and go-to coping tools, including smartphone apps for deep breathing and meditation.

The Veterans Crisis Line is available for phone calls, texts or online chats — and it's not just for when a person is feeling suicidal. Monsebroten said some vets want to talk about their nightmares, financial issues or relationship breakups.

Sometimes they fear calling because they assume police or paramedics will show up, she said. In fact, only about 25% of those who call the crisis line are referred to the VA, while the rest just need a sounding board and don't need follow-up care.

Ten years ago, the VA had one such national call center. Now, it has three. When Griffin was feeling suicidal and unable to get through on the phone, it was a military hotline — not the VA call center — he was calling, he said.

Since launching the first VA call center in 2007, crisis line responders have answered more than 3.5 million calls, according to the VA.

### A powerful reminder

In the 10 years since Griffin returned from Iraq, he's been married, had a child, divorced, moved from Iowa back to North Dakota and gained full custody of his son, while continuing to work through his demons.

His recovery means he's still here on this earth — to get married again and to raise his boy.

It means he can still play with the family's two dogs and look after the chickens in the backyard coop.

It means that Sgt. Griffin, a 13-year military veteran, can still attend weekend drills and volunteer to train members of his unit, one of his favorite things to do.

And, he's still here to share his experience with fellow veterans.

Griffin believes God gave him those tests in life because they would make him stronger, and that he'd use them to help others. He's recently started public speaking, addressing veterans groups and suicide prevention conferences.

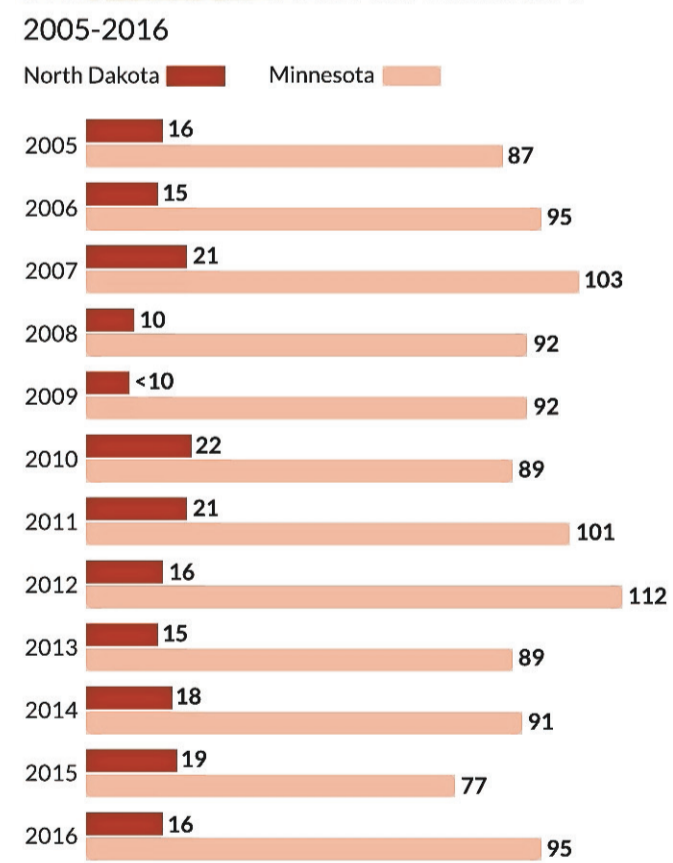
The pistol he once hated — the one he nearly used to take his own life — is



Special to The Forum

Sgt. Nathan Griffin is shown with his fiancée, Alicia Kania, in this undated photo.

## Numbers of veteran suicides



Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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## Suicide warnings: Look for the signs

- Talk of feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Speaking of unbearable pain or being a burden
- Suffering from depression or anxiety
- Loss of interest
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Withdrawing from activities, family or friends
- Agitation, anger or aggression
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye

If you or a loved one is in distress, you can call 1-800-273-8255 (1-800-273-TALK).

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Forum News Service

now part of the uniform he wears at his campus police job, and remains a powerful symbol for him. "This is a reminder of where I've been, and

where I don't want to ever be again," Griffin said.

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