

LAST STOP

The Best Therapy

Story by LETICIA CLINE

Everyone has a story about why they started riding motorcycles. It's what makes us unique. It sets us apart and unites us at the same time.

My father sat me on my first bike before I could walk, before I can remember my first memory, and before I could utter a single word. For extra money, he would build them in the living room of our tiny two-bedroom house at night, after working a 12-hour day as a truck driver. I grew up to the smell of oil and the sounds of engines, so it was inevitable that I would fall in love with them as an adult.

When I was 4, my dad got me my first bike, a Honda 50, with homemade training wheels. He didn't even have to show me how to start it, as I had already been his apprentice since the beginning, memorizing his movements as he would twist the throttle and slowly let out the clutch. I took off in the yard that day, and it feels like it's been one long, continuous ride ever since.

We started going to local motocross races and doing some amateur competing when we had time. When I was older, I would ride on the back of his Heritage Softail® through the national park we lived beside. Sometimes we would ride until the sun set, and I would fall asleep on his back, feeling more comfortable on the road than standing still. I couldn't wait for the day I could ride beside him.

My first bike was a 1990 XLH Sportster® that Dad traded an old



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSIE GUMPERT

worn-out, rusted panel wagon in for. We worked on it more than I rode it, and looking back I think he did that on purpose. It kept his little girl safely off the road, and it taught me how to diagnose and fix my bike myself instead of relying on a man to do it. He was always quietly protective like that. When it was running, we would ride to any and every rally we could until I moved away for college, and life started getting too busy to find the time. My dad still took trips, sending me postcards from each destination as a constant reminder that there was so much world we had left to see. When I got a little older and became a mom, I kept with tradition and bought my son a Honda 50, took him to an open field, and proudly let him take off the way my father did when I was 4.

In 2008, we had plans to do a cross-country ride, something we had talked about for years. On the list was Sturgis, the largest motorcycle rally in the world. Two weeks before we were set to leave,

my father suffered a massive heart attack while driving his semi and passed away unexpectedly. I rode his Softail to the funeral and didn't ride again until six years later. It was March 9, 2014, and I was hired to cover Daytona Supercross for a magazine. It was my first motorcycle event since my father's passing, so I took my son for support. As soon as I smelled the exhaust and felt the dirt on my face from the bikes flying past on the track, I knew where I belonged. I rented a bike that next weekend, rode 500 miles to a small bike rally, got my dad a patch, and then bought my Iron 883.™ A few months later, I sold my car and decided to only ride.

What I thought would be too painful to do because I no longer had my father to share it with actually became the best therapy I could have. I now feel closer to him than ever. Last year I started going to all the places he would send me postcards from, and wrote him and my son one in return. One of those places was Mount Rushmore, which I finally got to see when I made it to Sturgis this year—a place I will come to every year in honor of the ride we were supposed to take together.

My dad's road handle was "Smiley" because he never stopped smiling. In remembrance, I got a smiley face tattooed on my pinky knuckle on my right hand. Every time I twist my throttle I think of him. It reminds me that no matter what life throws at you, if you just smile and give it a little gas you can get through almost anything.

Some of us are born on the road, some of us find ourselves on it. Each of our stories are important. Regardless of if you just learned to ride or you've been riding for years, you're creating your own legacy one mile at a time, and taking part in the long ride that threads generations of motorcyclists together.

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