

Riding for the Cause

Elsa Knox Butler



Jennifer Dillan, a breast cancer survivor, will be riding a bike like this 1200 Sportster Harley Davidson motorcycle in a 1,000-mile ride in Australia as part of a fund-raiser to raise awareness of breast cancer. IJ photo/Alan Dep

After nearly losing her life to breast cancer at the age of 36, Ross native Jennifer Dillan decided to celebrate her survival.

So next week, she is hitting Australia's open roads on a Harley-Davidson to participate in a motorcycle rally to benefit fellow breast cancer survivors.

The event, called Changing Gears, is a global motorcycle relay in which young breast cancer survivors from around the world take part in one-week rides in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia. The goal is to raise awareness and funds for breast cancer support programs in all three countries.

"The fact that these women think a motorcycle rally up the coast of Australia is relaxing and fun speaks to their character," says Dillan, now 38, who chose to ride in Australia instead of California or the U.K. because she's never been there and it seemed like a real adventure. "These women are a fun, bawdy, determined group. I wanted to be with a group of women who had the same sentiments as I do about taking a bite out of life."

She will join 12 breast cancer survivors from the United States and 12 from Australia to ride motorcycles donated by Harley-Davidson for the Oct. 23 to 30 ride from Sydney to Brisbane.

Dillan lives with her husband and two children, ages 4 and 8, in Portland, Ore., and works for MercyCorps, a humanitarian organization. She left Marin in 1985 for the University of Oregon, and began taking riding lessons five months ago when she bought a Honda Rebel 450.

"This is really outside my box," she says. "This ride is about wrapping up this experience, and putting closure on it in a celebratory way. I'm in it because it's a declaration to the world, to my kids and to me that everything is going to be OK. It's an intense way to express gratitude for life. I can choose do anything, even ride a Harley."

Dillan realized during her ordeal that the issues faced by younger women with breast cancer are different from those of post-menopausal women.

"We're in the middle of careers. We have small children. There are body-image issues and issues of sexuality, and marriages can be thrown into a delicate place," she says. "You may not have your finances in order yet."

The funds raised during the ride will support Amazon Heart and the Young Survival Coalition, a resource that caters to the needs of younger women diagnosed with breast cancer. The inaugural Changing Gears ride from San Diego to San Francisco took place last year and raised \$45,000. Dillan has raised \$6,240.

Last weekend, Dillan celebrated her 20th high school reunion at Marin Academy, a milestone that has greater significance for her than most. When she was diagnosed, she had just weaned her 2-year-old daughter. What she thought was a blocked milk duct turned out to be cancer.

"It's so overwhelming," she says. "You have to think and make very important decisions so fast. You just want it out; it feels like something's hunting you."

Her sister, Dr. Nancy Dillan Rogers, who is an obstetrician and gynecologist in Hawaii, flew in to provide support and medical guidance. With a history of breast cancer in the family, Dillan underwent a mastectomy six days after diagnosis.

"Most women don't have the resources I had," she says. "I wanted to do something to help other young women who go through this very isolating and terrifying experience."

But she's not one to be predictable. "Whenever I feel like I'm fitting in too much to the norm, I like to shake things up," she says. "I've never been a motorcycle person, but I identify myself as a person who is up for anything. I figured doing this - being a biker chick - would round me out somehow."

"You think you're going to die, and then you don't. It's a rush. Then you have a shedding of inhibitions and hesitancy. There's a realization that life is short. It's trite, people say it all the time, but it's true. The simplicity of that message came roaring in like a locomotive for me."

Her father, Roger Dillan of Petaluma, says her daughter wasn't always like this.

"I think she's learned a lot from the steps and miss-steps as she grew," he says. "She's extraordinarily well-balanced and spunky outside the boundaries of life. She's got a zeal for commitment in all aspects of life."

In other words, he's not surprised that she's drawn to adventure.

"I think that more than an attraction to motorcycles, she likes that this is a vehicle for her to make a stand and make a difference and say that she wants more people to be inspired - in whatever form it takes - and do the same and draw more attention to breast cancer."

When the ride is over, Dillan says she will be happy to go back to driving the family Volvo.

"I have an agreement with my husband that when I get home, I sell the bike," she says. "I don't need to land under a bike on a freeway. My family has already been through enough."

"At the end of all this, I want to look back on this experience and say, 'Oh yeah, that's right ... once I had breast cancer,' but I don't think about it much anymore."