

This rebel plans to ride with a cause

The last time I talked to Janet Downes, she was planning her own funeral.

Today, she's planning a motorcycle trip through California.

That doesn't mean that everything has changed for Jan. She still has cancer — nasty, aggressive cancer — and there's no hope of it ever going away.



Rainbow Rowell

But there is still hope. With Jan, there is always hope.

I first wrote about Jan in 1998 when she celebrated her 40th birthday by marrying herself.

She threw her own wedding, with a dress and a cake and everything. (She had a maid of honor and a best man.)

Jan had just been diagnosed with breast cancer, and she wanted to make a commitment to



Downes

love and cherish the one person she knew she would be with for the rest of her life — herself.

That's Jan. Wacky ideas. Crazy plans. Eternal optimism.

With Jan, now 46, there is always more life to be lived.

And in her opinion, you haven't truly lived until you've been on a motorcycle.

That's one of the items on Jan's List of Things to Do Before I Die — "get back on a bike."

When she heard about Changing Gears, a motorcycle ride for breast cancer survivors, she knew she had to do it.

Changing Gears is a series of motorcycle rides in the United Kingdom, Australia and California. All the riders are women and breast cancer survivors.

Jan will ride on a borrowed Harley-Davidson from Los Angeles to San Francisco in late September. Along the way, the riders will make stops to promote breast cancer awareness.

Changing Gears is also a fundraiser. Each of the riders is expected to raise about \$5,000 for breast-cancer causes.

Jan is not sure yet how she is going to raise the money.

She doesn't even know how she'll pay for the plane ticket to California... or how she'll work the trip around her chemotherapy.

Or whether she'll have the energy to ride for two or three hours a day.

The other women on the ride probably will be "real survivors," she said. Done with chemo. Done with cancer.

In Jan's mind, she's a survivor until she's dead. She's determined to make this work.

"I hurt every single day..." she said. "I'm going to hurt anyway. Why not?"

Why not be hurting while she does something she loves to do?

She hasn't been on a bike since 1989. She used to have a little Honda.

"I love Harleys. I do. I'm a motorcycle mama." She plans to take a motorcycle safety class and get her motorcycle license before the ride.

The money she needs and the strength... hopefully, those things will come in time.

Oh, and by the way, Jan is still planning that funeral.

Lately, she's been thinking about having it before she actually dies. While she can still enjoy it.

That way, she can hear all her favorite songs and hear what her friends have to say about her. She can make sure everything goes exactly the way she's planned.

Jan has always said she wants her funeral to be invitation-only. Who's going to tell her she can't come?

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Read more about Changing Gears at www.changinggears.org.

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WEDDINGS

FRIDAY, MARCH 25, 2005