



PHOTO PROVIDED

Jean Riley on the Harley she rode from San Diego to San Francisco.

Survivor rides past her fear to help others battling cancer

JIM GORDON



Jean Riley liked riding motorcycles, but it was her husband Glenn whose hands were on the handlebars and throttle of the Harley-Davidson.

Then, when she was 41, Jean, a medical assistant who lives in Dyer, was diagnosed with breast cancer.

The time is never right to get that news, but as Jean's mom was fighting lung cancer, the diagnosis must have seemed like the cosmic equivalent of piling on.

During the following weeks, Jean and Betty Johnson shared their fears and a few tears.

"When you're faced with cancer," Jean said, "when your life is put before you, you begin to look at things differently."

One of the perspectives that changed for Jean involved her love of motorcycles. "I didn't want to ride on the back anymore," she said.

When Betty was in her last few days, she told Jean that she wanted her daughters to use the money she was leaving them to do something for themselves. Reading the light that came to her daughter's eyes, Betty said, "You go for it, baby. You buy that Harley and every time you ride, you think of me."

And that's what Jean did. Then about a year after she bought the motorcycle, Jean heard about Changing Gears, an event designed to generate funds for Y-Me National Breast Cancer Organization and the Young Survival Coalition, to challenge stereotypes of breast-cancer survivors and to provide a sense of community to young women who shared a traumatic experience.

Changing Gears was the first American event modeled on the Australian "Follow the Fenceline" ride.

The plan was to send 22 young survivors on a ride, with bikes provided by Harley-Davidson, along the California coast from San Diego to the northern end of the San Francisco Bay Bridge.

Early Oct. 2, the group geared up and headed north on the legendary coast highway California 1. The oldest woman was 49; the youngest was 32.

From San Diego to San Juan Capistrano to Oxnard to Cambria, through the Big Sur and the redwood forests. They would ride 90 to 140 miles a day, stopping for press events, talking about their experiences and building friendships that may well last a lifetime.

In her helmet, Jean carried a picture of Betty sitting behind Glenn in the place where Jean used to ride.

She remembers that at one point on the ride, some teen girls in pink shirts were gathered on an overpass, and as the Changing Gears riders passed beneath, they were showered with rose petals. And as they crossed the Bay Bridge, there were tears in her eyes.

The event raised \$55,000, and donations are still being accepted through the group's Web site, www.changinggears.org.

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