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CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Everyday Motorcyclists Buck Popular Notions

By Jim Witters

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Negative motorcyclist stereotypes range from the image of a leather-clad hoodlum in a Hollywood film to an unlicensed teen doing wheelies in rush-hour traffic to guys on dirt bikes blasting through the woods with no regard for staying on the trail.

As with most stereotypes, many negative portrayals of motorcyclists are based on a single bad actor—or even outright fiction. As we know, the vast majority of riders are responsible, safe and productive members of society. After all, those bikes (unfortunately) don't purchase themselves.

For many whose views are shaped by unfounded stereotypes, these "unlikely riders" draw gasps of surprise and raised eyebrows. Let's meet a few true representatives of the motorcycle lifestyle.

MARLENA GOVAARS HR BUSINESS PARTNER

San Jose, Calif.

- **Years riding a motorcycle:** 1.5
- **First motorcycle:** BMW F650CS—great bike, but uses belt drive, which doesn't work in the dirt/gravel
- **Current motorcycle:** BMW G650GS, basically the same as my first bike, but with chain drive and spoke wheels

AM What got you started riding motorcycles?

MG I'm a 45-year-old, 100-percent single mom to one lovely elementary-school-aged daughter. My boyfriend of 18 months is an avid motorcyclist who introduced me to the concept of adventure motorcycling. Very quickly, I started feeling the tug—riding pillion just didn't seem nearly as fun as getting my own bike! But I always had an excuse. Bob, my boyfriend, asked me one day: "What's stopping you from getting your license?" I started making noises about the cost of classes ... and wondered if I was coordinated enough.

Bob crossed his arms, looked at me, smiling, and systematically let me negate every one of my own objections. He let me come to my own conclusion—and literally the next day I enrolled in classes!

AM What is your favorite ride?

MG Anything paved, if it's twisty; and anything dirt, so long as it has lots of whoops!

AM What is the best memory you associate with motorcycling?

MG As a kid, my dad rode a Honda 350, often with me or my brother riding pillion. He was a staid engineer, and didn't fit the image of a guy who rides motorcycles. We wore safety yellow, open-faced Bell helmets, and I can still remember how I loved the smell of it while I strapped it on. As a kid, riding pillion was the closest I could imagine coming to flying, and I really loved the feel of the wind in my hair, even

if it led to painful tangles! I learned to shift gears riding in front of my dad, wearing flip-flops in the '70s—skinned the top of my left foot! He did all his own mechanical work, and sometimes we worked together, like bleeding brakes or changing oil. I didn't always get along with my father, so these are some of my only warm memories of him.

AM What is the image of motorcyclists among the general public?

MG I think the old stereotype is that a motorcyclist is a rebel. I believe this has softened into people who ride bikes are "adventurous." But definitely there is a streak of prejudice, that bikers can be reckless.

AM How can motorcyclists improve their image?

MG In the relatively short time I've been riding, I've been impressed with the caliber of people who choose to ride bikes. It's a great community.

AM What practical benefits do you personally get from riding?

MG My bike gets roughly 60 mpg, so I can argue I'm being ecologically correct. But, to be perfectly candid, I just enjoy feeling fully connected to my environment and the movement of riding. It's a different set of skills than driving a car, for sure. I also love that my daughter sees me taking part in an activity that currently still leans toward being male

dominated. She sees me being strong, skilled, taking time for something that genuinely gives me pleasure, bucking the idea that someone told me I couldn't do something—and am doing it anyway!

AM Have you ever taught someone else how to ride? What did you learn from that experience?

MG No! I took a fabulous course, and learned too much from it. I highly recommend taking the time, effort and expending the money on a real class.

AM How can we get more people on motorcycles?

MG My perception is that the trend is growing already. I see bikers all over Silicon Valley—fuel efficiency, the ability to ride in carpool lanes, and the fun are all obvious influencing factors locally. I'd never heard of adventure riding before I met my boyfriend, and now that I'm in tune to enduro bikes, I'm seeing them everywhere. Another thing I've noticed at the OHV parks is a large number of parents taking their kids out in the dirt. This is solid, high-quality time for parents to spend with their kids, imparting skills and knowledge, and giving those kids confidence that will serve them the rest of their lives.

AM Talk about a time when you encountered pre-conceived notions because you ride.

MG I work in human resources at a tech company and generally show up in a skirt, heels and manicured nails. Folks are really surprised when they see my dusty adventure boots and enduro helmet in my cubicle. I had one fairly senior level manager get very excited having seen my riding gear at the office. He was tickled when I showed him pictures of me riding in the Rockies. He's always been cordial with me, but I actually think he's more interested in me as a person now that he has a fuller idea of who I am.





Randy Coleman Photography

SHAUN "NOODLE" PRYOR REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION CENTER MANAGER Moore, Okla.

- **Years riding a motorcycle:** 18
- **First motorcycle:** Kawasaki KX 250
- **Current motorcycle:** 2003 Honda Shadow Sabre

AM What got you started riding motorcycles?

SP My grandmother rode bikes in the '60s in Chicago and taught me to ride when I was young. She told me it was all about freedom—and was she ever right!

AM What is your favorite ride?

SP State Route 66 from Edmond to Tulsa, Okla.

AM What is the best memory you associate with motorcycling?

SP Shortly after the tornado in Moore, Okla., last year, several of my friends who are also residents in Moore got on our bikes and rode through the streets when they were clear. We all rode with American flags and just rode, waving, honking our horns, and offering help to others in town. The kids sitting on the bikes, taking pictures, smiling and forgetting for just those few minutes we all lost everything. I just wanted to show everyone we were all still here and Moore would go on. I spent most of that ride with tears in my eyes, but it meant a lot to me. There wasn't much left of it, but it was home. It was very special.

AM What is the image of motorcyclists among the general public?

SP We're loud and obnoxious riders, who make noise and trouble everywhere we go.

AM How can motorcyclists improve their image?

SP It's tough to say. The stigma of bikers has been the same so long in the general public. I think the best thing we can do is stay active in our communities and work with local charities to show the softer side of bikers. We bikers have to keep in mind as we go through towns, or pass a car on the highway with kids going on vacation, that kids love to see us—a pack of 30 to 50 bikes, riding in formation, the vibration, the sound, the look. We change those kids. That's how bikers are born. It moves their souls. As such, we're role models in a way and don't even know it sometimes. So making sure we give them something to look up to, sometimes just that wave, or head nod, or honk of the horn—you share the gift with one more child and open the world of bikes to them!

AM What practical benefits do you personally get from riding?

SP I save tons of money on gas. My favorite thing about my bike though, is the ability to stop anyplace, like near a river, near a bridge, and take a picture, or soak in the smells, feel the warm sun—things never possible inside your "cage!"

AM Have you ever taught someone else how to ride? What did you learn from that experience?

SP Yes. I learned that we, as bikers, have a responsibility to each other to a degree. When someone wants to be imparted with the knowledge on how to ride, you feel compelled to teach [him or her]. You find you're sharing something bigger than yourself when you see them shift for the first time, or make their first turn at speed. The face they make in that moment reminds you why you ride. Sharing that feeling with someone else who's never felt it before really means a lot! It's humbling.

AM How can we get more people on motorcycles?

SP We have to change the perception people have about bikes. So many times, you hear people give the speech that bikes are dangerous, and, more often than not, they have a story of someone they knew that was killed or badly injured in a crash. It's [about] changing the culture, the negative connotation that so often comes with motorcycles. And getting more people speaking about the feeling of being free, and loving the ride.

AM Talk about a time when you encountered pre-conceived notions because you ride.

SP I find myself spending more time explaining why I ride, why I wear patches,

and what kind of things I do on the weekends, more than I do talking about my bike and where I ride to. I had a younger male customer I've known for years who saw my bike sitting outside the facility and came inside and mentioned how nice the bike was, and asked who it belonged to. At the same time, I walked around the corner in my leathers, heading out, and, with a gasp he said, "I never took you for one of those guys!"

Which of course was the segue into a 20-minute conversation about me being a biker, and whether everything he saw on [the TV show] "Sons of Anarchy" was true. When I have surprise visits from the higher-ups at the corporate office, and they see the bike and see my gear sitting in my office, they have a million questions, all from what they see on TV. My employees, to this day, part the seas when I walk out to talk to them and haven't had a chance to get all my gear off. In some ways, it's almost like living a double life. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

CAROL ANN SCHMIDT RETAIL MANAGEMENT

Ridgefield, Conn.

- **Years riding a motorcycle:** 10
- **First motorcycle:** Yamaha TTR90
- **Current motorcycles:** 2014 CRF250L, 2007 KTM 144SX, 2011 Honda Ruckus, 2003 CRF150F, 1978 Honda Z50, 1972 Honda Trail 70

AM What got you started riding motorcycles?

CAS My father. He bought that TTR90 in spring 2004, and I was hooked. I rode every day in my backyard.

AM What is your favorite ride?

CAS I started in the dirt, and my true love is still motocross, but I love the street—my supermoto is too much fun!

AM What is the best memory you associate with motorcycling?

CAS Spending time with friends and family and meeting new people. It's taken me to some amazing places. I've ridden with (multi-time AMA championship-winning motocross racers) Doug Henry and John Dowd, which was pretty awesome. I've been racing the Stimilon Motocross Challenge for several years, which is always a good time, and my favorite event of the year. I also love attending the AMA outdoor rounds. I've been to Unadilla, Southwick and Broome Tioga. Watching the races, being with my dad, and smelling the race gas.

AM What is the image of motorcyclists

among the general public?

CAS In the Northeast, I think that motorcycling is accepted. There's a large amount of riders, and when we ride, people ask us about our bikes. Our Ruckuses really draw a crowd—they are pretty modified and look kind of wild. Although, one time when I was out on my Ruckus, I had a lady follow me back to my neighborhood and got pretty upset that I was riding an "unregistered" motorcycle (scooters under 49 cc's don't need to be registered in Connecticut).

AM How can motorcyclists improve their image?

CAS We need to continue to support the people who support our sport, such as the AMA and members of Congress who support riding rights. More people need to realize that motorcycling is a great family-oriented sport.

AM What practical benefits do you personally get from riding?

CAS What's not to love? Besides the fact that I completely love being on two wheels, it's also a great way to make new friends, unwind from a crazy day, and not to mention it's much more fun to ride somewhere than drive my car. Working and restoring bikes is also another aspect

of motorcycles that I enjoy. I'm always on the lookout for a basket case bike that needs a restoration. My favorites are old Honda mini bikes.

AM How can we get more people on motorcycles?

CAS For starters, we need to save our open space. A lot of legal riding areas are being shut down, and, when those close, there's nowhere to ride. Dirt bikes are a great way to get into riding—they are small, cheap and easy to maintain. If we save our riding areas, more people will want to pick up a dirt bike, and they're going to want to scratch that itch and get on the road.

AM Talk about a time when you encountered pre-conceived notions because you ride.

CAS Pretty much everyone I meet is surprised to learn that I have seven motorcycles and ride almost every day. My work nametag has "Moto" written on it, as it's a nickname a coworker gave me. More than once, I've had a customer ask me about the name behind "Moto." It always turns into a 15-minute conversation about motorcycling, which is pretty fantastic.



Dave Schmidt



Mariayna Demernd

AMANDA MARIE KNAPP, PH.D.
ASSISTANT VICE PROVOST,
Academic Standards and Policy
Administration – University of
Maryland, Baltimore County
 Columbia, Md.

- **Years riding a motorcycle:** nearly 30
- **First motorcycle:** Honda 70
- **Current motorcycle:** KTM 300 XCW

AM What got you started riding motorcycles?

AK From the time I can remember, I was surrounded by motorcycles and four-wheelers. When I was about 6 years old, my dad bought me a Honda 70, and I remember spending hours making figure eights in a big field behind our house. As the years quickly passed, I moved up to

a YZ125, then a CR250. In middle school and high school, I would spend every free hour getting lost in the woods, slugging through thick coalmine mud, climbing hills, battling rocks and holding on for dear life to keep up with my dad and his buddies.

I was an only child growing up, and my dad never took it easy on me, especially when it came to riding—he always challenged me to face fear head on and never let me use the fact that I was a girl as an excuse, even though I was usually the only girl out there. Learning to ride and keep up with the guys taught me lifelong lessons that I still value today and truly believe have helped me to become successful in both my professional and personal life.

AM What is your favorite ride?

AK In many ways, I was very fortunate to grow up in the foothills of the Appalachian

Mountains in a rural town called Mount Storm, W.Va.—population less than 900. Just up the road a bit in Davis, off State Route 93, is where the Grand National Cross Country Series got its start—home of the Blackwater 100. This is where I grew up riding and without question was one of my favorite places to ride—a dirt bike rider’s dream. While laws prevent us from riding there now, I will never forget the experience I had riding some of the toughest terrain nestled within the most breathtaking landscapes you can imagine.

AM What is the best memory you associate with motorcycling?

AK The incredible thing about motorcycling is that it can bring communities of people together. Some of my best memories began early on a Sunday morning, not at church, but gathering down at the “holler” with anywhere between 10 and 50 locals, all revved up and ready to hit the dirt. We would head out with no real plan or destination in mind, but, wherever we went, it would take all day until the sun went down. Other than having some good old-fashioned fun, the only certainty was that we would come back covered in mud from head-to-toe, exhausted but happy. The greatest thing about these ventures was that everyone helped each other out and many good friendships were forged.

AM What is the image of motorcyclists among the general public?

AK In my opinion, this is a very difficult question to answer, because it really depends on the region or area where you live. As I mentioned before, I grew up in a rural town where the motorcycle and four-wheeler population just might have outnumbered the people. However, where I live now, in Howard County, Md., “frequently cited for its affluence, quality of life, and excellent schools,” the perception of motorcyclists is not positive. While I agree that Howard County is “One of the Best Places to Live,” according to CNN/Money Magazine, it is lacking in motorcycle friendliness. Sadly, the image of motorcyclists in places like Howard County has been tainted by things like unsanctioned and illegal street racing that readily gain news media coverage, painting an unbalanced picture of the motorcycling culture.

AM How can motorcyclists improve their image?

AK As a dirt bike rider, we tend to tell our wildest and craziest stories with little thought about the image that we might be portraying—I know I am guilty of this myself. However, one of the things that I think we could do a better job at is talking

more about the positive aspects such as the time and effort we invested in being a responsible rider, making sure we had the right equipment and safest gear.

What made me think of this is that I recently read an outstanding article on the Rocky Mountain ATV Blog that described 33 Reasons Your Kids Should Do Motocross. Topping the list of reasons are things like providing non-violent entertainment, reinforcing good health and positive relationships, teaching the value of a strong work ethic, playing fair, working as a team, obeying the rules and taking personal responsibility. While the article was geared for why kids should ride, the information was applicable to all ages. These are the kinds of stories that we should be sharing if we truly want to impact the motorcycling image in a positive way.

AM What practical benefits do you personally get from riding?

AK Stress release, health and fitness, family time, sense of self.

As a mother of three, a busy professional who has a full-time and part-time career, [and one who] volunteers in the community, serves as a Girl Scout Leader and just finished a Ph.D. program, there is nothing more rewarding and stress-relieving than hitting the trails and/or a track. When I am riding, it is the only time that I can block out the chaos around me and focus on myself.

AM Have you ever taught someone else how to ride? What did you learn from that experience?

AK At 34, when I restarted my motocross career after a nearly 15-year break, I was presented with the challenge/opportunity of teaching my husband, who had never ridden motocross a day in his life, and my three children, Gracie, 10, Riley, 7, and Mason, 5. If I wanted to ride, it would have to be a family activity—it's not like I could just leave them behind!

In any case, now that our garage is filled with two-wheeled, two-stroke machines, I find that teaching my family to ride brings back a lot of great memories from my dad teaching me. I also find that working as a family team (we call ourselves the KTM Knapps) has brought a great deal of joy and bonded us in ways that we didn't anticipate. My father-in-law always jokes with us saying, "a family

who races together, stays together," but all joking aside there is something quite special about spending an entire weekend together on two wheels—not sitting in the house, not playing video games or watching TV—just having fun together!

AM How can we get more people on motorcycles?

AK Work with our local government to create more opportunities and manage costs.

This is an interesting question with lots of opportunities. As someone who has made a career out of working with policy, this is an area where we must focus our attention.

For instance, we must continue to push for legislation that is based on facts and not misperceptions. We must be advocates for our sport who demonstrate

encountered pre-conceived notions because you ride.

AK One of my favorite stories is about an encounter I had with a neighbor a few blocks away. For years, I have passed the same set of houses on my way home, but one day after work I noticed that the neighbor had a dirt bike loaded in a trailer on the back of the car. I was in a bit of shock since I had never seen a dirt bike in the entire town of Columbia, Md., before, let alone one just up the street from me. So, I slowed down as I passed by the house, but didn't see anyone outside. So I went to the end of the street, and, still in amazement, decided to turn around and drive by the house again.

I admittedly did this a few times, until I finally spotted someone. I stopped my car, and, in a full business suit and high heels, walked up to the neighbor, who I had never met before, and asked if that was his bike. He reluctantly answered me but seemed annoyed.

The conversation was a bit awkward in the beginning. But after I explained my interest in his dirt bike, and we talked for about 45 minutes he laughed and said, "Heck, I thought you were someone from the community association and were going to give me a ticket or something."

Now that I know my neighbor, Jim, and we have joked about this day on many occasions, I realize that this was a situation based on a pre-conceived notion. Because of the way I dressed and the type of

community we live in, Jim was surprised by my story to say the least!

Of course, that neighbor that I didn't know for years is now someone I call my friend. Isn't that what motocross is all about anyway?

Regarding my professional life, not many people knew about my outside hobby of racing until I came to work with a broken toe after clocking a tree with my foot on a tight turn during an ECEA hare scrambles.

Now that the story is out, I hear the same thing over and over each time that someone learns that I race: "No way. I can't picture that!" When I ask them why, it almost always has something to do with the way that I dress or the position I am in, my title or that I have a Ph.D., as if these things define who I am or put me in a box of who I can be.



respect for the environment and take motorcycling safety seriously.

On a different note, I would like to see more girls and women in the sport. I recently went to an event and joined my mother, who is in her 50s and also a motocross rider. It was organized by Kelsey Green from Happy Ramblers called "Girls Just Wanna Ride" and I thought it was just exceptional! There were about 70 girls and women of all ages, all backgrounds and all skill levels who went from station to station learning everything from bike maintenance to starting gates to fitness drills to agility training. The format provided a great opportunity to get out and ride in an encouraging environment where building confidence and having fun was the first priority.

AM Talk about a time when you

D. SCOTT BARBER ATTORNEY

San Diego, Calif.

- **Years riding a motorcycle:** 25
- **First motorcycle:** 1982 Suzuki GS550 Katana
- **Current motorcycle:** 2004 BMW R1150GS Adventure; 2004 KTM 625 SXC “Adventure”

AM What got you started riding motorcycles?

DSB My dad was a member of the San Diego Mountain Rescue Team and would take my brother and me along to their training [sessions]. He had a little Honda Trail 90 that he would always bring along, and I would ride it around the campground and around a vacant lot in our neighborhood.

AM What is your favorite ride?

DSB My favorite road is Caliente-Bodfish Road up near Kernville, Calif. It's super twisty and narrow, like a guy in a helicopter with a giant roll of asphalt underneath flew along the hills and valleys and laid out a rollercoaster of a road.

My favorite trail is the trail to Mike's Sky Ranch in Baja, because I know that fun, beer and camaraderie are at the end of the trail.

AM What is the best memory you associate with motorcycling?

DSB There are so many, it's really tough. Overall, it is a 10-day trip I took with my friend Devin. We rode throughout the desert Southwest—Scottsdale, Sedona, the Grand Canyon, through the wilderness to Bullhead City, Ariz., to Death Valley and then to Kernville, Calif. It was an amazing ride with a great friend, and we got to see some of the most amazing scenery the Southwest has to offer.

AM What is the image of motorcyclists among the general public?

DSB Unfortunately, I think the general image is either of riders flying through traffic or riders with straight pipes creating a racket. Those of us who ride (relatively) conservatively don't really get noticed in a bad way.

AM How can motorcyclists improve their image?

DSB By not riding like clowns on public roads. Save it for the track. And by not using overly loud exhausts. Also, by talking to people. I love taking the time to talk with people about riding and doing my best to correct misconceptions and stereotypes about riders. I do anything I

can to positively raise people's awareness of riders.

AM What practical benefits do you personally get from riding?

DSB Obviously, free parking and reduced fuel consumption are nice, as is lane splitting [in California]. However, the best benefit of riding is meeting other riders. In general, people who ride motorcycles tend to be more interesting and full of life than those who don't ride. I have met many interesting people and seen so many new perspectives on the world through meeting other riders, particularly those from other countries.

AM Have you ever taught someone else how to ride? What did you learn from that experience?

DSB Not yet. I will teach my daughter to ride, along with taking the Motorcycle Safety Foundation course, when the time is right. I can't wait! That said, a lot of my friends are newer riders, and I offer them pointers now and then.

AM How can we get more people on motorcycles?

DSB By highlighting all of the practical benefits as well as the “spiritual.”

Shattering preconceived negative images will get more people on bikes. It's all about raising positive awareness.

AM Talk about a time when you encountered pre-conceived notions because you ride.

DSB Almost every week, I hear someone exclaim, “What? You rode here? In a suit? Where's your gear?”

My job takes me throughout Southern California. Generally speaking, if I am going anywhere Fresno or south, I ride. When I get where I'm going, I pull out my briefcase, fix my hair and stuff my riding gear in my panniers. Unless I'm going to court, I take my helmet with me. That's what usually starts the conversation.

One time, I had an 8:30 a.m. appearance in Ventura, which is about a three-hour ride, so I left home at 5:15 a.m. When I got to court, I realized I had left my dress shoes at home, so I had to appear in my riding boots! That turned out to be a fun conversation with the judge in front of a packed courtroom. He admired the fact that I had ridden all the way to court. Now I wear BMW boots that look enough like dress shoes that I don't have to change them.



Rob Andrew Photography