

Being A Responsible Motorcyclist

by Genevieve Schmitt

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED that once you became a motorcyclist your life changed. As soon as you became a rider, you became the talk of your family and friends. Your parents brag about your riding activities to their friends. They bring motorcycle-related news to your attention: "So what do you think about Governor Schwarzenegger's motorcycle accident?" Your children's friends refer to your children as their "friend with the biker mom." Your husband, if he's a rider, brags to his buddies: "My wife rides her own motorcycle." Even at work, you're the talk of the office. "Did you know Genevieve rides a motorcycle?! No way," the office clique gasps. When you choose to ride, you impact those around you who do not.

Whether you view this attention as good or bad, you are now the go-to person when it comes to motorcycling stories and information. I'm sure this kind of stuff has reached your ears: "I have a friend whose uncle died in a motorcycle accident." Why do people feel like they have to share crash stories with us?

All this attention makes you a star in a way. All of a sudden, what you do now in relation to motorcycling becomes public domain. People you know form opinions and feel, just as they do with a celebrity, that they have free reign to comment on your choice to ride a motorcycle—whether you want to hear it or not.

In a weird way, we kind of like this attention. It sets us apart from the rest. The rest of what? The conformists, those who travel the straight and narrow, those who fall in line, those who go right instead



of left. Often, a woman rider is the only one in her family or immediate circle who rides, and making the decision to ride wasn't easy for some. She's gone against the grain. I still encounter folks who don't know or have never met a person who rides a motorcycle. That makes it a rare activity among the general population. It's not like golf where if you don't golf, you probably know someone who does.

With all this attention comes a responsibility, I feel, to represent the motorcycling community positively among non-riders. The image of motorcycling has come a long way since the bad boy or loose girl rebel image of the

1960s and 1970s. The image of a motorcyclist today is seen as more likeable, less rebellious, and no longer a threat to society. I believe it's up to every motorcyclist today to help this neutral image gain more ground. It means being a role model in public places around non-bikers. This includes on the road.

Here's an example. Most of us have felt levels of frustration on the road, whether in a car or on a motorcycle. Call it road rage. On a motorcycle, it's so easy to ride up beside the driver's side window of a car that just cut you off, wait for the dimwit driver to look your way, and then give him the finger. That revenge feels good to some. "There! I got the last word," you're thinking. "He won't do that again!"

Well, sure he will. You just perpetuated a lingering stereotype that bikers are tough people who swear and spit, flip the bird, and have no manners. Why should he care about such low-life rebels?

I don't want to tell you how to ride—my desire is to raise your awareness of how you're being watched by others when you are on your motorcycle, particularly if you're a woman. A woman on a motorcycle is still a rarity among the general population, so when a woman

rider is out in public, she's noticed—her actions, her demeanor, her smile. If you're a woman, you know exactly what I mean. Think about the last time you pulled into a gas station and then walked into the nearby convenience store. You can practically feel the eyes burning holes in your riding gear.

Except for that one percent of the motorcycling population, the majority are law-abiding citizens who just happen to enjoy an activity the general populous deems dangerous. In my opinion, that gives us an edge. I don't mind being viewed as someone who engages in a "dangerous" sport, because I know that with proper training, motorcycling is not dangerous.

I like to share with the uninformed and misinformed through my words and my actions that riders are extra special people. It's fun to do something completely out of the ordinary and shock all those staring eyes. Indulge with me in this scenario: while fueling your bike, you notice an old woman shuffling slowly up to the convenience store. You, the motorcyclist, stop what you're doing, and walk over to lend her an arm. Imagine the visual of you outfitted in your riding gear gently assisting an elderly woman up the curb and inside the store. Talk about shattering any semblance of a lingering biker stereotype. That's another edge—knowing when to engage in subtle, positive gestures when all eyes are watching you. You may really want to help that old woman, but if you're dressed like a tough girl or guy (that's what motorcycling gear inherently does), your actions are sure to further a positive image of bikers. And that, to me, is the responsibility of a motorcyclist. **FZ**

Genevieve Schmitt is the founder of Women Riders Now, a motorcycling news and information network (www.womenridersnow.com). She can be reached at gschmitt@womenridersnow.com.