

Sharing the Passion

by Genevieve Schmitt

AS I WRITE THIS I'm planning my annual trek to Sturgis, South Dakota for the big motorcycle rally. Counting the number of official magnet souvenirs stuck to my refrigerator, this is my tenth rally. It feels like I've been

going longer than that, but I know I have not missed a year collecting that annual magnet.

The other day I met with a couple of friends about joining me on my ride. My friend Eric told me he's planning on riding with his dad. "His dad," I repeated to myself silently, my heart drooling with envy. "How cool is that?"

I would love to share the passion of motorcycling with a family member, especially my mother or father. I came to motorcycling on my own, not through any two-wheeled roots in my family tree. My folks are the farthest you'd get from riders. They're Florida retirees who golf.

During my nearly two decades in the saddle, I've met several families who ride together. In 1998 on a trip from Los Angeles to Milwaukee for Harley-Davidson's 95th anniversary celebration, I met a mom, dad, 19-year-old son, and 18-year-old daughter with three bikes among them. Dad and Mom rode two-up; brother and sister rode their own. Talk about a family vacation!

My friend Lani Alexander's entire family rides including her cousins, aunt, uncle, and grandfather. The only one who doesn't ride is her grandma, but she's still part of the fun as driver of the SUV hauling all the gear. Lani's grandfather inspired his whole clan to take up two wheels when upon retiring he bought the Harley-Davidson Sportster he had always wanted. He eventually handed down that Sportster to Lani when she was in her early twenties. "At that age, it was a cool thing to do," recalls Lani. "For my mom and aunt, it was the freedom they were attracted to. It's so important for us to spend time together and motorcycles are the way to do that."

Street riding is not viewed as a family sport like dirtbike riding is. With dirtbiking, there are local races designed to attract youngsters, and manufacturers (like Honda) advertise dirtbike riding as a family event. All this focused marketing makes it easier for Dad and Mom to consider it a family activity and to encourage their children to ride. Why, then, are parents not influencing their driving-age teenagers or 20-something sons and daughters to take up street motorcycling?

I pose this question because the biggest challenge facing the motorcycle industry today is attracting young people to the sport.



The largest segment of riders is the aging baby boomers—51 percent are between ages 41 to 60, according to a recent survey by J.D. Power and Associates. Only seven percent of riders are aged 21 to 25 and another seven percent are 26 to 30. The concern is once the baby boomers get on in years, they'll buy fewer motorcycles. So, the

manufacturers are looking to a new crop of buyers, and right now that's Generation Y.

There are varying reports on what years define Generation Y, but we're talking those born between 1981 and 1995 (give or take a few years on either side). They are 70 million strong, the largest generation outside of the baby boomers. Generation Y is growing up questioning authority and asking "why" every chance they get. This generation of women view men as equal in the boardroom and in the game room, and men see women the same way. They have a greater awareness of financial issues than the generation before them, so they're savvy about money and what they want to spend it on. Generation Y is the group everyone is trying to reach right now.

What happened to Generation X? It came and went before I realized I was one of them. Guess our population numbers didn't rate because I don't recall a lot of focused marketing towards me.

I was born in the first year of Generation X, so marketing messages were skewed too young for me to relate. Plus, marketers didn't spend a lot of time with Gen Xers because when they realized baby boomers had more money, more stability, and were much bigger than Generation X, they moved right on catering to them...which, by the way, meant they were trying to reach me here, too. My birth year is on the high side of the baby boomer years. Those marketing messages didn't catch my attention either because they were skewed too old. Call those of us born in 1964 the forgotten generation.

While we might have gotten lost in the marketing shuffle, those in our early 40s and late 30s can do our part in assisting the motorcycle industry by passing along our love of motorcycling to our Gen Y children. Encourage your kids to take the MSF Basic RiderCourse. Children are more likely to give motorcycling a try with parents as role models. I don't have any children, but if I did you can bet I'd sign them up for the class and buy them a motorcycle. How cool would that be to ride side by side with my son or daughter to Sturgis sharing the passion every mile of the way! **FZ**

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