

A Biker's Worst Nightmare...

There is an old saying, you never see a motorcycle parked outside a psychiatrist's office. Riding a motorcycle involves euphoric feelings of adventure, freedom and excitement. You must experience riding to truly appreciate it.

When I was young I could not wait to drive. I started drag racing a Chevy when I was 16, but when my high school boyfriend introduced me to motorcycles, I discovered my first love—the motorcycle. After three rides on the back of a motorcycle, I needed to take the handlebars and I haven't let go since. Motorcycle training courses would not exist until the 1970's, so my lessons came from experienced riders. My first lesson was in the late 1960's in a backyard on a large, intimidating, kick-start, tank-shift Harley. The first thing I learned was that many crashes happen at intersections and because of distracted drivers. The second thing I learned was the importance of riding defensively.

I have worked in the motorcycle industry since 1977. In 1983 I co-founded the 2nd chapter of Women in the Wind (now an international riding group). In 1985 I co-founded Harley Women magazine (the 1st magazine geared toward female enthusiasts). In 1996 I was the fifth woman inducted into the National Motorcycle Hall of Fame and currently I am the events coordinator for City Limits Harley in Palatine, Illinois. Four decades, two experienced rider courses and nine motorcycles later, I have accrued hundreds of thousands of (safe) miles in the saddle and I can't imagine life without a motorcycle.

Midway through 2009 I noticed more motorcycle crashes than usual. I believe distracted drivers are largely to blame. It was also a particularly bad year for my family. My niece had a stillborn baby, my nephew and aunt passed away, my sister developed cancer and four days after 'Zena' my

Doberman passed away in my arms, I almost lost my own life.



Jo with her Doberman Zena and her 1996 Harley-Davidson

It was July 17th. I fired up my Harley after work and put on my leathers. I made a quick call to tell my 86-year-old mother that I was on my way home. Traffic was light as I cruised at about 40 miles per hour through the intersection. Suddenly, it was a biker's worst nightmare! A car turned left directly into my path. Impact was inevitable. I had no time to hit the brakes and no way of missing the car. Instincts kicked in, I knew I had to avoid T-boning the car or the outcome could be worse. The impact came fast. I laid my bike down hard on her left side. I believe I hit the rear of the car and tore off the bumper. To this day, I don't know when I was separated from my bike. I felt a hard impact then another one. My clear night-riding glasses were ground down by the car or pavement. I landed on my hands and knees. My Harley slid about 25 feet farther down the road. Dazed and in pain, I tried to get up or crawl but I couldn't. I turned to see headlights coming at me. I knew that some riders survive the initial crash only to be hurt worse or killed by traffic. I tried to ignore the pain and move sideways toward the median.

Thankfully, another motorist pulled up and protected me. He turned on his emergency flashers and blocked me from oncoming cars. Still dazed I called my boss to come and get my bike. Then I called my mother. After all of our family tragedies, I did not want her to get a call from the hospital. I down played the accident and told her someone hit my bike and I thought I should get checked out. Traffic moved slowly in the opposite lanes with people peering out their windows. Some must have been thinking, 'Is this woman really talking on her cell phone after just being in a crash?!' When I saw the Palatine police and fire departments coming, I felt like the cavalry had arrived! Still on the pavement, I thanked God for keeping me so safe, under the circumstances.

As my gurney bounced into the ambulance, I worried about many things and knew I would miss out on more. I wondered how Mom would fare if I had to stay in the hospital. I thought about tomorrow's benefit ride that we organized for Arena of Dreams and knew I would not be attending. I thought about the ladies' ride I was supposed to lead and my upcoming motorcycle vacation, both no longer an option. As the paramedics tended to me, I wondered how severely I was injured and how badly my bike was damaged. In the emergency room, I wondered how long I would be off work and how I would pay my bills during my recovery. But most of all I thought about my family and friends and was grateful I would get to see them again.

The hospital cut off my clothing, stitched my knee and took me for x-rays and CAT scans. I left four hours later in a wheelchair still wearing my Harley sweatshirt. My injuries included a chipped kneecap, stitches in my knee, many badly bruised bones, road rash on my knees, nose and forehead, and pain that enveloped my entire body.

Almost a year later, I am still in pain and seeing doctors. I have permanently damaged knee cartilage and the image of that car will be embedded in my memory forever. Ice packs are a part of everyday life and I often use a cane by the

end of the day. My Harley Road King, with 92,087 miles on it, was totaled. She was more than just a piece of machinery to me. From May 1st–15th, 2009 she was on display in the lobby of Harley-Davidson's Museum in Milwaukee during the beginning of Women Rider's Month. The first time I saw her after the crash, I could not help but cry.



Left to Right: Jennifer Knourek, Illinois Biker Information Guide, Jo Giovannoni, City Limits Harley-Davidson and Gina Woods, co-founder of Open Road Radio

I am determined to ride again-God willing. But I know riding has changed forever. I have been told that the pain in my knees might never go away. This will undoubtedly affect cross country riding, which is something I love. I am not sure why the young driver did not see my large Harley with its big headlight and two spotlights, but I know that my years of experience and the two Experienced Rider Courses I took through the Illinois Department of Transportation's, Division of Traffic Safety (IDOT/ DTS) were vital to my survival. Prior to the crash I was an avid supporter of IDOT/DTS's - START SEEING MOTORCYCLES campaign. I am more dedicated than ever in spreading IDOT/ DTS's safety messages through promotional materials designed to save lives. I encourage everyone to spread the word to START SEEING MOTORCYCLES and save lives! ⚠️

By Jo Giovannoni, Events Coordinator, City Limits Harley-Davidson