

Motorcycles for MS



Bikers defy stereotypes by holding a cruise-in to raise money for MS.

by Shara Rutberg

It was a cold, gray spring day in Bradford, Tennessee, but the rumbling that erupted was not thunder. It was a posse of leather-clad bikers, roaring into town on gleaming motorcycles of every type. People on the town's main street could feel the vibrations of the powerful engines under their feet as the riders slowed their bikes, rolling through the three commercial blocks of downtown Bradford, population 1,048. On other days, in other towns, the arrival of a leather-clad chrome cavalry, complete with skull-and-crossbones patches on their jackets and fearsome facial hair, might worry the locals. But not on April 26, 2015.

That Sunday, Bobby and Mitzi Brooks, the owners of Jus' Bike Me, a motorcycle apparel and accessories store in Bradford, hosted the town's first Charity Cruise-In, focusing on multiple sclerosis this first year, and raising over \$2,000 for MS research and programs. Beyond raising money, the couple wanted to "put a face on the disease," says Bobby. That face, which was beaming throughout the day, belonged to his wife, Mitzi. On the couple's honeymoon 20 years ago, a quick stop to replace a forgotten pair of glasses led them to an optician who noticed irregular pupils, a symptom that eventually led to her diagnosis.

Unlike some events where bikers ride from point to point, a cruise-in event happens in one location.

"It's like a little festival," says Mitzi. The cruise-in featured live music, karaoke, a swap meet, food vendors selling local specialties like fried pork skins and barbecued bologna, and, of

course, lots of motorcycles. Judges awarded prizes in categories from “Fattest Bike and Rider” and “Dirtiest Bike and Rider” to “Most Patriotic” and “Best Paint Job.”

The Brookses had wanted to kick off an annual fundraising event at their shop and, for them, MS was the obvious choice as the initial beneficiary. They plan on raising funds to help fight other diseases affecting members of their small community—in addition to MS.

“We didn’t know what to expect—whether we’d get five people or 20 people,” says Mitzi. “But people just kept coming. And the weather was ugly.” The couple estimates there were 200 motorcycles and more than 400 people in town that day, many of whom drove hundreds of miles to attend. One pastor at a biker church in Nashville started on the far side of that city, then rode downstate, picking up bikers in Dixon, Waverley and Jackson. The free event attracted participants and volunteers ranging from 15 to 80 years of age. Parked bikes lined West Front Street, which was closed to cars for the day. The local TV station sent a team to cover the event.

“It boggles the mind that people would come out in force like that,” she says. “Our store’s only been here a year, so people were coming to support the cause—not us. A lot of them had never even met us.”

The Brookses promoted the cruise-in through their shop’s Facebook page and with posters printed for free by the local print shop. Bradford businesses, from the flower store to the beauty salon, donated prizes for drawings. One customer from the region saw the Facebook notice and dropped off \$800 worth of tools to be offered as raffle prizes. A country-rock band played for free. A motorcycle club provided security. Mitzi’s brother-in-law, who owns a portable toilet business, brought some loos to the event.

“We couldn’t have done it without the volunteers. It was like the whole town helped,” says Mitzi. “With MS, there’s dark days and light days—days you think, ‘I can beat this. I can win.’ This was one of those days.”

“It’s a shame that bikers get such a bad rap from what you see in movies and on TV shows,” says Bobby. “Because that’s only a small percentage of the biker community. Most are charitable, loving, hard-working people—just good folks.” And they’re good folks who give. Even in their corner of Tennessee you can generally find a motorcycle charity event every single weekend, he says.

When Mitzi was 16, she cruised around Tennessee on a hunter-green Indian, a highly esteemed motorcycle. Today, balance issues prevent her from riding. Health issues stemming from three heart attacks do the same for Bobby. However, in the repair shop behind their store, he’s working to build a trike they can both ride. “It doesn’t matter if you’ve got two wheels or three,” says Mitzi. “There’s just a bond between bikers. It’s a brotherhood of the most giving people in the world.”

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