

Switching gears



His wife's MS diagnosis led Gary Dagastine from deputy sheriff to bike shop owner.

by Kelsey Blackwell

When Gary Dagastine started selling recumbent bicycles out of his garage in 2000, he didn't realize his side hobby would soon become a second full-time job. Since he was one of the only dealers of recumbents around Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, customers soon began arriving from near and far looking for the unique tricycles that offer riders more safety and comfort than traditional upright bikes because of their larger seats, back support and lower height.



Beth and Gary relax on recumbent bikes outside their shop in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Photo courtesy of the Dagastines

Gary would meet customers early in the morning before putting on his badge as deputy sheriff for Kootenai County in Coeur d'Alene. In the evening, customers gathered around his shop waiting for him to return from work, and when he arrived, he spent time with each of them. Sometimes it wasn't until after 10 p.m., that Gary could finally change out of his uniform, his wife, Beth, recalls.

Now retired from the sheriff's department, Gary laughs, looking back. "I don't have a clue how I did that," he says. One thing that likely kept him going during those long days and nights was seeing firsthand how riding a recumbent had changed Beth's life.

When she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1992, Beth didn't know what MS was or how it would impact her life long term.

"The first doctor I talked to told me my husband and I would probably end up getting divorced and I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life," she says. "I was extremely depressed. For a few years I was just up and down."

Optic neuritis in her left eye made her feel as though she was looking through water, and she experienced pain throughout the left side of her body. Beth had been extremely active most of her life—riding a two-wheel bicycle, scuba diving and tending a quarter-acre garden. But difficulties with balance and fatigue now put most of these activities out of reach.

Gary bought her an upright tricycle hoping it would help her stay active and support her balance, but the bike tipped over frequently. "I think we both thought I was trying to kill her," he jokes. Adds Beth, "The first time I fell over I thought, 'OK, let's try again,' but the third time I said, 'That's it, no more.'"

A new outlook, a new business

After hearing about a recumbent bike show in Spokane, Washington, Gary was intrigued. They made the trip from their home in Post Falls, Idaho, but it took a little more convincing for Beth to give one of the tester bikes a try.



Customers who come from across the country and as far as Canada, enjoy a sunny day on the shop's lawn. Photo courtesy of the Dagastines

"I wasn't doing good that day," she says. "I was still in my wheelchair, and I did not want to get on [the bike], but eventually I did. I sat down, and I was surprised by how comfortable it was. The seat was wide. Balance was not an issue. I could go where I wanted at the speed I wanted. Being on the bike, I was independent. It was great."

So great, in fact, that Beth stayed on that first bike for an hour and half while others waited for a chance to ride.

She was hooked.

Since there were no bike dealers in the area, Gary called a manufacturer to see if a bike could be shipped. "The manufacturer asked, 'Why don't you start selling them in your area?'" Gary says. "I thought, sure, I could probably sell a few."

Today, his business Northwest Recumbent Cycles is regularly the No. 1 seller of recumbent bicycles in the country. Gary has expanded the business from his garage to a 30-by-40-foot shop and a 51-foot trailer. The bikes sell for between \$1,100 and \$4,500. Customers come from across the country and Canada, and he regularly works with people living with health conditions, including MS.

That doesn't surprise Kathy Zackowski, PhD, senior director for Patient Management Care and Rehabilitation Research at the National MS Society.

Better balance

Recumbent bicycles in particular can be beneficial for helping people with MS stay active when they have trouble with balance, she says. “Because you sit back, you have trunk support. For many people, that makes it so they can exert themselves easier without feeling that they’re at risk for falling. A recumbent bike is also lower to the ground, thus giving it more stability than a traditional bike.”

The benefits of physical activity for managing symptoms associated with MS are clear, Zackowski says. “It can improve cognition and decrease depression and fatigue. It’s also really known for improving your ability to be more social.”

With the support of a recumbent bicycle, Beth is now able to be more independent. She takes her bike to the grocery store and even the drive-through at her bank. “They just chuckle at me,” she says. A few years ago, she participated in a 20-mile bike fundraiser for her local Kiwanis Club.

“It helps with getting exercise,” Beth says. “Without it, my legs would be jellyfish. I’m not as weak.” And the depression she previously struggled with? It’s not as much of an issue anymore, she says, thanks in part to being able to ride and the work she’s done for 17 years as an MS advocate. She travels around the country to help educate others about MS.

Though life is busy, the Dagastines make slowing down a priority. On Thursdays, Gary closes shop early for a dinner party bike ride with Beth. Sometimes it’s just the two of them and other times they may be joined by 30 or more friends—some on recumbents that Gary has sold and others on road bikes, mountain bikes and cruisers.

“We have a sign in the shop that says, ‘No matter how slow you go, you’re still lapping the guy on the couch,’” Gary says. “We believe that life is to be lived and that’s what we’re gonna do, and hopefully help others do.”

Kelsey Blackwell is a freelance writer in Berkeley, California.

See more at [Northwest Recumbent Cycles](#).

[Bike MS](#)[®] offers 80+ fully supported rides of various length across the U.S.