



CHICKS ON HOGS
 Don't know a female biker?
 Well, you will.
 BY STEPH GREGOR / NOVEMBER 15, 2007



Dan Trittschuh

Petite and soft-spoken, Dena Besece is dwarfed by the dozens of 600-pound motorcycles in the C&A Harley-Davidson showroom. When the 40-year-old blonde welcomes shoppers to the store, she notices that some of them smile politely but look past her. “I still get men who walk in and say, ‘Can I speak to the owner?’ And I have to say two or three times, ‘I’m the owner.’”

“When you ride a bike, guys definitely take notice”: Besece said 15 % of C&A Harley-Davidson’s customers are women

Carl and Adonna Besece opened the Plain City store in 1987, but it’s their daughter Dena who runs C&A now—a notion some customers still have a little trouble grasping.

“You still get some guys who are old-fashioned,” Dena Besece said. “You have that in any male-dominated industry.”

C&A, however, is anything but a male-dominated business. The operation has six women in management positions, and they’re marketing their products to an increasingly female customer base.

Besece said almost 15 percent of her customers are women; in fact, Harley-Davidson sold 4 percent of its bikes to women in 1990—a percentage that has since tripled.

And the Ohio Department of Public Safety reports that the number of female motorcyclists in the state has risen by 28 percent in the last five years.

The C&A staff have even composed a Top 10 list featuring reasons “chicks should ride hogs.” (No. 7: Black leather is very slimming. No. 1: A motorcycle has a 12-volt battery instead of two AAs.)

Hopping on a motorcycle is “very empowering,” said Besece, an avid rider herself. “Women are much more independent now.”

They’re also less intimidated, thanks to aggressive efforts by retailers to offer safety training and other classes.

“It can be intimidating to walk into a motorcycle shop and say, ‘Hey, I want a motorcycle,’ and try and get it home on your own,” said Dave Russell, sales manager at Ohio Motorcycle in Hilliard. “Now, they’re being instructed and learning more how to do it.”

C&A offers women’s “garage parties,” said the store’s director of marketing and promotions, Alexa McAllister. “It’s a chance for women to learn about motorcycles from women who ride them.”

However, most female motorcycle pioneers are quick to concede that it was men who piqued their interest.

Besece fondly remembers riding with her dad when she was 9 and he would “bungee me to the back seat.”

“I remember falling asleep on the back and cracking his helmet with my helmet when I dozed off.”

Jo Anne Horton, 61, works as the executive assistant to the president of the Beauty Avenues division of Limited Brands. She recently completed a 5,000-mile ride on her Harley Heritage Soft Tail Classic.

Back in 1968, Horton’s then-husband was in the Air Force. He owned a bike and she often rode on the back. When he was sent overseas, she took the opportunity to learn how to ride it herself, and she never looked back.

“I like being able to be my own person. I’m an independent free spirit,” she said. “I have ridden on the back, but I just like to do my own thing, basically.”

“When my Mom was 61, she was old,” she said. “This next generation, with the Baby Boomers, we’ve got a lot of spirit in us.”

ABC6 and Fox 28 news anchor Yolanda Harris is a self-described girly girl who never thought of herself as a potential motorcyclist. But five years ago, Harris went to a Pennsylvania motorcycle event called Thunder in the Valley with her husband, Todd Smith.

The event opened Harris’s eyes to something she hadn’t really noticed before—women with their hands on the handlebars, not wrapped around their husbands’ and boyfriends’ midsections.

“I never thought I would ride on my own,” she said, “but we saw them riding and I said, ‘I want to do that.’”

Once she and her husband got back from the trip, Harris picked up an anniversary edition Sportster.

“I was scared to death,” she said. “It took awhile for me to be comfortable and not have a death grip on the clutch. It took two seasons of riding to feel comfortable with myself. It was my own fear and I had to overcome that to prove to myself that I could do it.”

“It’s very liberating because it’s just you, the hum of that bike, the wind blowing in your face. It’s very empowering, especially for women.”

Men are accepting—even enthusiastic—about women with their own bikes.

“Don’t buy a dog to meet people,” said McAllister, who owns her own hog. “Buy a Harley.”

“They love a woman on a bike,” said Besece. “When you ride a bike, guys definitely take notice.”

Russell said some men have their own motives for encouraging their female partners to ride.

“From what I’ve seen from our customers,” he said, “the man’s perspective is, if they can get their spouse or girlfriend on a motorcycle it makes things a lot easier for them.”

“You say ‘motorcycle’ 10 years ago and the woman said, ‘You’re not getting a motorcycle.’ Now, you see the women going, ‘OK, maybe I’ll get one, too, and I can ride with you.’ So men are very excited about it.”

From the paint to the style, a woman can customize her bike to fit her body and

personality.

“Over the course of the past five years, the women coming in are buying more gear,” said Barbie Kindle, C&A’s motorclothes manager. She added that safety equipment has seen a sharp increase as well.

“I think women are more safety conscious,” Kindle said. “We’ve seen our helmet sales increase because women are the ones purchasing them.”

Maybe fashions that blend motorcycling and femininity—Harley offers a pink leather jacket—will break down lingering stereotypes about the kind of woman who rides her own bike.

“People may think we’re hardcore bikers,” Besece said. “Rough. Cuss like sailors. Which is really a general myth about people who ride, male or female.”

“When people see me, they’ll say, ‘You don’t look like a biker.’ Well, what does a biker look like?”