Wheels of Love

An easy rider recalls the hard bumps on the road of life

June 1, 1998 By Mike DeStefano

My whole life I dreamed of owning a Harley Davidson. I vividly remember driving in my dad's Cadillac on the New England freeway when I was a kid, looking out the back window at a pack of leather-clad bikers. When most people see these guys, they see a bunch of roughnecks looking for trouble. I saw the freedom that can be found in the wind. I've spent my whole life searching for that freedom.

As a heroin addict, it was difficult for me to buy a tube of toothpaste, let alone a $13,000 motorcycle. It took getting my life together for this dream to come true. I eventually stopped sticking needles in my arms. I got a job, health benefits and a wife. I got my dream machine and my freedom, ironically because of my wife's hospitalization. As an educator for the Florida State Health Department, I got great benefits, including an unusual policy that paid $100 a day if either my wife or I was confined to a hospital. Let's just say she spent enough time in the hospital to get us 15 grand. It was enough to buy me my Harley.

My wife's name was Frances, but I called her Franny. I was 25 and she was 35 when we decided that we could do together what we couldn't do alone—live with HIV. The week that I'm writing this is, in fact, the week of our wedding anniversary—the day I told my wife that I would love her "till death do us part." I didn't know what that meant until long after the church bells rang, when I was sitting by Franny's bedside in the hospice at 3 am.

The hospice became our second home. Franny was there longer than anyone else in the staff's memory. She was too young to die and never, as far as I knew, accepted her demise. Since she had always been supportive of me getting my new toy, I wanted her to see my dream come true. When I finally had the cash to get it, I wasted no time.

I rolled into the hospice parking lot on my 1988 Harley Davidson Heritage Softail—the mother of all bikes. She was two-tone black and red with chrome everywhere and big gangsta whitewalls; my little piece of heaven in the ninth circle of hell.

I ran inside to get Franny to show her the thousand pounds of steel that would carry me into the wind and blow all the death off me. I went into her room and told her, "I got the bike, sweetheart." She was medicated and she was dying, so she didn't exactly jump for joy. Franny was particularly

low that day, but I knew that as soon as she saw the Harley she'd light up. I went outside to wait for her on my bike with a big smile on my face. She made her way to the parking lot in her little slippers, pushing her IV pole. She gave the bike a long, hard look, sizing it up like it was no big deal. Her expression said: "You've got a lot of nerve buying this bike when I'm dying here." And then she turned around and walked back inside.

I wasn't sure what to feel. Was I selfish for buying the bike? Was it wrong to give myself something? I had spent so long taking care of Franny, I just wanted to be Mike for a while.

One of the hospice social workers came outside. She was a wonderful woman who cared deeply for Franny and me. "Michael," she said, "you didn't do anything bad. Fran is going to die soon, and she knows it. She feels you don't need her anymore. The motorcycle represents your life without her." I understood something at that moment that hadn't occurred to me before.

When I went to say goodbye to Franny, she was already asleep.

The next day I woke up, took three wrinkled work shirts out of my closet and headed to the hospice. I walked into Franny's room and placed the shirts on her bed. She looked at me like I was nuts. "What the hell are they for?" she asked. I told her I had no pressed shirts for work. "I'm dying here, and you want me to iron your clothes?!" she said. "You bastard." I kissed her and went to work.

When I returned at lunch, my three shirts were hanging in the closet, perfectly pressed.

Later that afternoon I took Franny for a ride around the hospice parking lot on my Harley. She was holding her morphine bag above her head. It was a classic moment. We were so alive.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Wheels-of-Love-7155-4418