

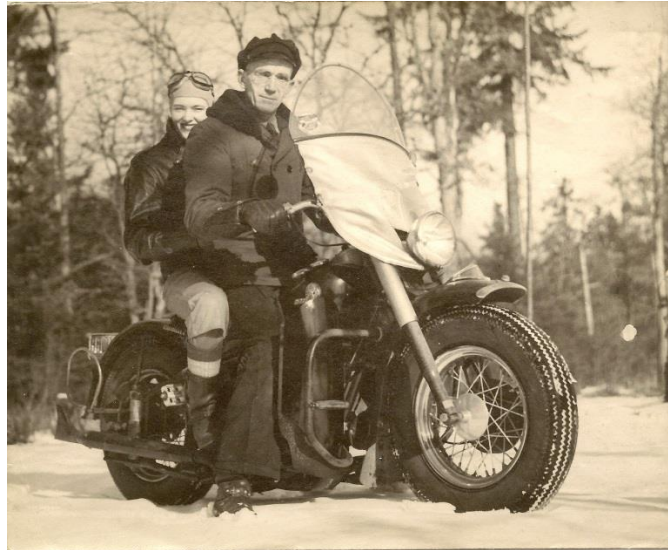
## *EPIC JOURNEY – my struggle to ride*

### Editor's Note:

*This story is not about an epic ride, rather it is the story of the immeasurable challenges John Stockman faced in order to ride. It is also the story of the sources of his strength, his realizations about the public perception of motorcycling and his resulting dedication to make a difference. John joined SMARTER as a charter member in 2007.*

My name is John Stockman. I was born in July of 1957 and grew up in Tacoma, Washington. I have traveled over 310,000 miles by motorcycle, even more adding in off-road and dirt riding. My family members were motorcyclists, and our history goes back to the board tracks on my maternal grandparent's side of the family. One of my ancestor's was a famous factory racer who rode for Indian, Harley and Excelsior. After the demise of board racing, he went on to have a fairly successful two decades of competing in the Indy 500, while still riding and testing for motorcycle OEMs. Sadly, in the late 1940's he was killed while testing the Tucker for Indy 500 competition (the Tucker was an advanced automobile briefly produced in Chicago in 1948 - only 51 cars were made before the company folded on March 3, 1949).

I grew up around motorcycles, however, my first real riding experiences began at the age of 8 riding pillion with my Grandpa George on his 1939 Indian Chief. He rode all over on that bike and at many times it was his only transportation.



***My mom and Grandpa George - 1950***

He had told me when I could reach the passenger pegs with both feet, I could ride with him. That very first ride was just around the Olympia, WA area back roads, but I'll never forget it.

My parents got me a Honda Z50 when I was 10, the one with the rigid rear-end. It was becoming obvious at that time something was wrong with me. I noticed I couldn't straighten out my legs,

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arms or fingers and my joints were swelling.

Two memorable rides when I was between 11 and 12 years old were riding with Grandpa George to Sturgis when the Jack Pine Gypsies still ran the event, and going to Bonneville for Speed Week.

My condition started affecting me noticeably when I was about 12, so I was fortunate to have had those amazing experiences with him on the Indian before I couldn't straddle a motorcycle seat anymore. My spine started to curve and I could not stand up straight. It got to the point at age 14 that my spine was fused along with both hips. I couldn't even get my legs apart enough to sit on a motorcycle seat.



*Me on my Z50 - 1968*

By the time I was 18, I had been told I'd be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life.

Ankylosing Spondylitis (AS) is an auto-immune condition, with a collagen gene (specifically, gene HLA-B27) being defective. It turns joint cartilage into bone. My spine resembles a piece of bamboo. Bone-on-bone, as you can imagine, is extremely painful. My own body's immune system destroyed my joint cartilage...but just cartilage in the joints, not the cartilage that makes up say, your nose or ears. I was constantly misdiagnosed even as my condition became more and more obvious. It was the late 60s and nothing was known about this condition. I didn't get an

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accurate diagnosis until 1997 at the age of 40. When I was young, going through many invasive and painful tests, I was told I had MD (muscular dystrophy), which was pretty much a death sentence back then since it was obviously affecting my entire body.

It wasn't that, so doctors said maybe MS (multiple sclerosis), Polio, or could be Rheumatoid Arthritis.

With how involved my journey was, it's difficult to condense it into a few pages. I've been attempting to do this for 15 years but I found that many were just not interested in the story of a guy who wanted to ride a motorcycle again and the indescribable challenges, struggles and physical pain I went through. Some simply did not believe me. At the time I started, I didn't realize the scope of what I was doing, nor how much negativity I'd encounter.

My physical and medical journey to ride again was something my grandfather supported. By the time I was 14, I was already quite disabled, walking with crutches because my spine and hips became fused.

Yet my goal of wanting to ride a motorcycle was met with refusals. I learned not to share my enthusiasm and dream to ride with any doctors. "I just want to be able to walk without crutches after 12 years of fused joints" is what I began telling them. It took me almost 2 years to find a surgeon that would do total hip replacements on a 22 year-old guy. The negative reactions from friends and physicians were something I couldn't understand back then. My therapist even quit on me. I naively told her what I was up to; she was a close friend and physical therapist that helped me through the hip replacements, so I thought she would understand. Nope, I was told I was wasting resources and money, to do what, ride a motorcycle?

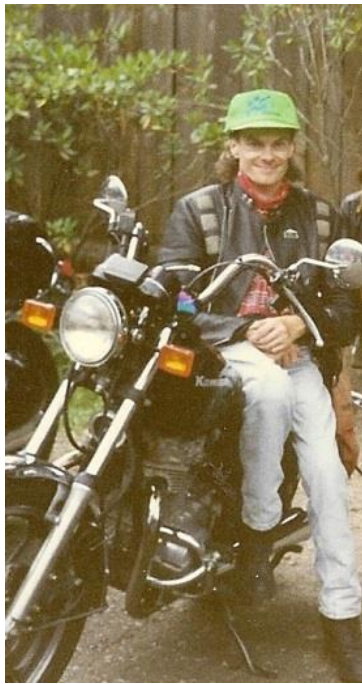
I had 3 surgeries between 1980 and '83; the first one failed and had to be re-done. During that time period, I also endured 3 years of painful and exhausting therapy/exercise 3 times/week to get my atrophied leg muscles working again.

Sadly, my grandfather died from pancreatic cancer in March 1983, only two months after his diagnosis. Even though my dream to ride my own motorcycle with my grandfather on his Indian was not to be, he had told me not to let his departure keep me from going forward. Before he died, he encouraged me to continue, not to listen to anyone who is negative, and that my goal and dream to ride my own motorcycle was truly worthy.

I got my first street bike in May 1983 after throwing away those crutches – just two months after Grandpa George's passing. That first real bike was a 1981 Kawasaki KZ250 with only 500 miles on it. I put 38,000 miles on it in two years, going all over the west and Canada. Many would tell me "you can't tour on a 250". I told one person "well, here I am in Westlock, Alberta, I'm from Olympia, WA and I don't see a trailer or truck around."

After two years, I wanted to move up to a bigger bike. My unique ergonomic requirements meant that many bikes did not fit me well and were uncomfortable to ride. In 1985, I found a 1980

KZ440LTD that fit my physical requirements well. I couldn't straighten out my knees, nor bend them back very far, but the KZ440 had foot peg mounts that could be re-positioned. I rotated the pegs so they were about an inch lower and re-welded the brackets. That 440 was a complete beater! The wiring had been hacked up, but the compression was good, so I replaced and rebuilt all the important bits and found a complete wiring harness at a local motorcycle salvage yard. I put 35,000 trouble-free miles on that first KZ440.



**At a Kawasaki sponsored event  
in Elbe, WA. 1985**



**East of Paradise, Mt. Rainier, 1988**

In 1989 I bought a second, better-condition, low-mileage 1981 KZ440LTD and used the first one for a parts bike. The 440 series was easy to modify for my needs because of its design, so I stuck with them. I put 45,000 miles on my 2nd KZ440, again with no troubles. I can't say the same for my body during that time. From 1983 to 1993, I had 3 more replacement surgeries for a total of 6 body-carpenter procedures. The cement they used to keep the implant in the femur would deteriorate after 2-3 years. In '89 and in '93 I had cement-less implants "installed" and haven't had a need for replacements since.

In 1993, the same year I had my last hip surgery with the cement-less implant I bought my 3<sup>rd</sup> and final KZ 440. I sold the first one and kept the second as my "new" parts bike.

The third KZ440 is an usual story. When I went to look at it, it was lying on its side, buried under a huge pile of furniture. After they moved all the furniture, it looked so sad, laying there on its side. The good news was it only had 700 original miles. The bad news was it still had 7 year old gas in the tank & carbs and a big dent in the tank. The battery had leaked its entire liquid contents out, which got all over the electrical components under the seat, along with the swing

arm, tire, chain and exhaust. I spent 3 months rebuilding, buying new & used parts when I could find them and repainting the frame. I fixed the tank and re-painted that also. Most of the consumables like bearings, chain/sprockets, cables, brake lines, etc. were easy to source. With only 700 miles, the engine/transmission was like new and needed no work. I put 10,000 miles on the 3<sup>rd</sup> 440.

By 1996, I was experiencing more deterioration in my muscles and joints, so I looked for an alternative to the KZ. I was not going to give up just because I might not be able to ride 2 wheels anymore. I had gone through too much to stop at that point, so I explored sidecars and trike options. For a year, I researched and rode different sidecar rigs and a few delta-trike motorcycles. I decided with my physical situation the trike conversion was going to fit me best.

In 1997 I bought a 1988 GL1500 with 22,000 miles and a Lehman conversion kit and had both shipped to my house in Tacoma, WA. At that time, you could still install the conversion yourself. In the next 12 years I piled on the miles - 172,000 on the GL after conversion.



**Eastern British Columbia on the '88 GL1500, 2002**

Odd as it may seem it wasn't until this same year (1997) at age 40 that I finally found out for sure what was wrong with my body. I had an opportunity to see a world-renowned genetic specialist at the University of Washington. He was familiar with my condition, the rarity of it, and how it can manifest itself in different ways. For some people, it affects only the spine and or pelvic area. Others, it affects the entire skeletal system like it does with me. That is why it made it so difficult to diagnose when I was young.

In 2008 I reluctantly sold the GL1500. It had been totally reliable and was my partner, always getting me home. I bought a brand-new 2007 Ural Tourist in 2008. My muscles were continuing to get weaker, so I only had the Ural for a year. In '09, I bought a low-mileage 2007 Suzuki

Burgman 400. The Burgman was a terrific way to close out my riding career, back on 2 wheels. I enjoyed the Suzuki for a year and a half and 3,000 miles.



**At the dealership in Salem, OR thinking about test Riding Ural Tourist – 2008**



**My last bike – a 2007 Suzuki Burgman 400 purchased in 2009**

With the collagen gene being defective, it also affects certain muscle fibers. I could not build up my muscles for strength, so as they got weaker, my physical ability to safely ride and control my motorcycle was deteriorating. I made the toughest decision ever and stopped riding in the summer of 2010. It was becoming more and more difficult to get my gear on because of the reduced range-of-motion I was experiencing in all my other joints. If I could not wear the proper gear and be safe with my riding skills, I knew what I had to do.

I know JQ Public has a negative viewpoint about motorcycles and those who ride them based on misconceptions, misinformation and the poor behavior of a select few that garners the wrong kind of attention. I couldn't comprehend the level of ignorance that had resulted in being vilified like I had been. I did not do anything illegal or immoral, but the way I was treated, it appeared I was.

My niece has told me it's time I speak up as my kind of experiences should not be forgotten or in any way marginalized. I've realized that my story might help someone else, whether they want to ride or do something else. It's about having the fortitude to go through with a dream or goal...the end-result is not as important as the accomplishments and all the steps taken to reach a personal goal. I find it extremely sad that because my goal was to ride a motorcycle, Grandpa George was

the only person who really supported me for the monumental challenges I faced. Others just denigrated me because of what I wanted to do.

Overall, and now in hindsight, my experiences are positive, even with all the opposition I met. It turned out that motorcycling *saved my life* and was the only mortally-available option for me to enjoy any semblance of physical freedom again. Bikes gave that back to me, along with feeling better about who I was and my future. My self-image improved and so did my skill-level. And on a back road with a lot of curves, I'm the same as other accomplished riders...and on the track also.

The reality is that if I'd gone through all that to play a ball sport, climb a mountain or run a marathon, I would've been a hero, celebrated for conviction, dedication, courage, and applauded for my strength and fortitude. Did it all to ride a motorcycle? Not interested.

Being congratulated or applauded for what I accomplished was not the reason I persevered - receiving accolades never crossed my mind. Looking back, I think when I began to realize what I was in for from beginning to end, especially with how other people's perceptions are skewed regarding motorcycles and those who ride them, it only made me more determined. I know I never really thought about it that way at the time, it was just what I wanted to do - for me and for my memory of Grandpa George.

Grandpa George always told us to present a positive impression about motorcycling to the general, non-riding public. When folks don't have or keep up their skills, or wear some decent kit, it affects other riders. After all, JQ Public sees us as "one", no matter what style or type of bike we ride. Cruiser, touring, sport, ADV, dual-sport, off-road, etc. are not really differentiated by those who don't ride and never would. One unskilled or no-gear-wearing person affects a large number of those who care about their skills and do wear their kit.

I'm proud to be a disabled rider who had to overcome incredible challenges and an insidious Ankylosis condition to be able to ride. I've been talking about the issue of how we as a group are perceived negatively since I was able to ride again in 1983. I will always remember what grandpa taught me by his actions and how he talked to people about the positive aspects of motorcycling. It really is a simple straight-forward message. Keep your skills top-notch, wear the best gear you can and make responsible decisions.