

From: Karen Richards [mailto:bikerchick@karenrichards.com]

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To: mail@karenrichards.com

Subject: Changing Gears Australia - The Final Chapter

Dear Friends,

I got back safe and sound from my journey to Australia earlier this month, and after about a week was caught up on sleep, laundry and work. How to describe this year's event had been a challenge – which is one reason it's taken me so long to get this to you.

The challenges this year were very different than last years – as I suspected they would be. I was glad to have several days in Sydney before getting on a strange motorcycle to get acclimated to some of the major differences – in particular, being on the wrong side of the road. The weather was unseasonably cool (probably 60's?) and cloudy those first four days so there wasn't much opportunity for beach time, but it was good for driving around sightseeing with my friend Kitty – who moved to Sydney with her Aussie husband in January. She knows her way around amazingly well for having been there so short a time. Sydney is not the easiest city to get around in, but it sure is fabulous.

One unexpected challenge was having very rigorous schedule with little time to explore or relax. We really didn't get to see much of the towns we stayed in. We were up, vans packed with gear, and out on the bikes by 8:00 most mornings, and not at our next stop until usually after 4:00 – when most things in the towns were closing for the day – then meeting for group dinners by 6:00. Just time to shower and arrange our things for the next day.

Another interesting and unexpected twist was that we had "group" accommodations about half the time - namely Youth Hostels. I understand now that these are appropriately named. They are not called "Hostels for Middle Aged Women" for good reason. There was not a single Heavenly Bed to be found. And don't even bother to ask about mini bars...

I've posted a journal on my [website](#) with details from each day of the trip, along with a new photo album. Probably way too much information for most of you, but I wanted to get it all down before I forgot – another reason this is so late!

The riding was fantastic! I loved the motorcycle I was assigned – the new Street Bob (whom I affectionately, if not originally nicknamed "Bob"). We hit it off right away. What a fun bike to ride! But even better was the turnout in every town of groups of breast cancer survivors. These ladies were so excited to see us, and most put on lunches or afternoon teas for us. They were so inspired by us and so anxious to meet us and hear all of our stories. They loved trying on our jackets and having their pictures taken on our Harleys. In one small town a woman approached me and asked me if I was the rider from Chicago. Turns out she had gone on the website and found my profile. Her niece lives in Schaumburg and recently underwent a mastectomy. She wanted to know if I'd be willing to contact her niece to talk about my experience. These connections were an incredibly important part of this event for me.

Even when there wasn't a planned event with a survivor group, we ran into survivors everywhere we went. The first day of practice rides we were in downtown Sydney in a public plaza having photos taken for a newspaper. As we were lined up to exit the plaza, I overheard a woman say to her friend "Hey look – they're all girls!" I turned to her and replied "We're not just girls, we're all breast cancer survivors". She grabbed my arm and said "Oh my gosh – so am I!" And so it went.

There was a lot of media coverage all along the way and we were frequently told that people had seen us on TV. In addition to being featured on TV and in local papers, there was a crew from a national news magazine show called Australian Story – bigger than our 60 Minutes – that traveled along with us for over half the ride. They are producing a 30-minute documentary about the event. What great coverage for Amazon Heart and their events!

The most important aspect of the ride though for me was my interaction with the other 18 riders and 3 van drivers. I was worried that with so many returning riders from last year's event (12) that the 6 new riders and Aussie van drivers might not feel part of the group or it might be more difficult for us to get to know them. As it turns out, some of the newcomers turned out to have the most impact on me – and many others.

One rider in particular – Greta – defined this event for me. Greta shared with us the first night that she had not been able to talk to anyone about her illness since she was diagnosed 2 years ago at age 35. That she hoped to find in us, others with whom she could finally share her story and her fears. She has 2 young girls and a husband in denial. As the days went on and she shared more about her illness, it became more understandable why this was the case. It turns out that when Greta was diagnosed, she was already dying. She was stage four and the cancer was widespread. Doctors gave her 18 months to 3 years to live.

Although she was in pain a great deal of the time during the ride from the cancer in her bones, she never failed to entertain us with her sharp wit and straightforward talk. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to be Greta's roommate the last night of the trip. We stayed up until 2:00 in the morning – talking, crying and laughing – and mostly just sharing stories about our lives with no regard to the 6:00 wake up call. It struck me how interested she was in ME – not about telling her story, or talking about dying. That to me says all anyone needs to know about Greta. How much she cares about other people, and how she is living her life in the time she has. She is a true Amazon Warrior.

All of us understood that this could have been any of us – and still may be someday. What an inspiration she is to all of us for living her life with courage, selflessness, humor and honesty. What better role model can any of us ask for? There are many stories about many more of my fellow survivors, but I'll leave those for another time.

So for all of you who supported Amazon Heart with your donations to this event – or supported me by sharing in my excitement to participate, please know that part of what you have done is made it possible for survivors to connect in a very special way in this and future events.

What an incredible thing for 23 survivors to come together and inspire each other with stories of courage and strength – to have a safe place to share our hopes and our fears (even if the place was a bunk bed!) – and to have an opportunity to express our defiance of this awful disease by turning us loose on these beautiful, powerful motorcycles for such an amazing journey. What an ultimate symbol of living large after cancer. Thank you Harley-Davidson for letting us ride these gorgeous machines, and a special thank you to my Bob. I'll always remember those special times we shared in third gear.

Amazon Heart is about connecting survivors and providing adventures for us to share with each other. It's the connections we make with each other that help us learn how we can live better, fuller lives as survivors because of the lessons we learn from each other. Add to this the adventures we share, and we forge bonds that will last all our lives. And while I won't be riding in an event next year, I will stay involved with Amazon Heart, because I do believe so strongly in what they do. I have been asked by them to serve as a mentor for participants in future events to help them with fundraising and training.

I have updated my website with links to my photos and my daily journal. Be sure to visit www.karenrichards.com for all the details!

I'm still not caught up with thank you notes, so if I haven't gotten to you yet, I promise I will soon. I appreciate your patience.

Best wishes and thanks to you all again for your love and support.

Karen

"It's not the destination, it's the journey"
"Four wheels move the body, two wheels move the soul"

[Click here to find out about my Changing Gears adventure!](#)

