

Female Mechanics Calendar Project

Stories of my motorcycle journey finding and photographing female mechanics from around the country

Sarah Lyon

The summer of 2006 I found myself in small motel room in the tiny town of Walden, Colorado after a day long 500-mile ride on my 1978 Yamaha XS750. On the other end of my cell phone was Jennifer, a motorcycle mechanic in San Francisco who has owned her own shop for twelve years. As if the ride that day wasn't fulfilling enough, added to the previous month of traveling thousands of miles on my well-loved vintage

Jennifer Bromme at Werkstatt



Nevada

bike, Jennifer was explaining to me how I had changed her life by inspiring her to follow her dreams. What an incredible way to end my day! Her comments about my journey's significance to her resonated in me — one of the reasons I had traveled to California from my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, in the first place was to meet Jennifer. As a female mechanic, *she* inspired *me*.

I had heard of Jennifer years before while riding through San Francisco on the same Yamaha. She is the owner of Werkstatt, a popular motorcycle racing and repair shop. She's also the head mechanic there and a former sidecar racer. Though we had not yet met, Jennifer became one of my many inspirations for creating a documentary project that would allow me to seek and spend time with a unique type of person — Female Mechanics.

During our phone conversation that night, Jennifer described friends who talk about projects they would like to do but never follow through with them. This project of mine — creating a wall calendar of female mechanics photographed in their environments — was something I had been planning since my first 9,000-mile motorcycle journey in 2003. Finally, in the summer of 2006, I had the opportunity to fulfill my dream.

My experiences in Kentucky as a part-time motorcycle mechanic and carpenter taught me skills that I love to learn, but there was one thing missing — other women who also love these jobs. I didn't mind working in environments with only men but I often was treated as an anomaly during my initial experiences in the workplace and sometimes even throughout the duration of the job. I wanted to know how other women dealt with the variety of pressures in these situations.

Curious to find other women like myself (as well as having a passion for travel, adventure, riding, and a further understanding of my own motorcycle), and desiring to challenge stereotypes of what women can and can't do led to my idea of the calendar. What better way to create something that represents women in a positive way than cruising around solo to different cities on my bike, meeting women who also love the challenge of fixing machines?

My first step embarking on the project was to find funding and support. I was afraid that people might get the wrong idea and think I was trying to objectify women as in a typical tool-girl, pin-up calendar way. So I put my ideas in writing and applied for a grant from a local arts organization, the Kentucky Foundation for Women. Though the calendar is mostly self-funded, support from KFW increased the project's legitimacy and helped me get started.

highway 93, Nevada



riding in Utah

The most challenging part of the project was finding a variety of subjects. My list included mechanics who work on automobiles, motorcycles, military vehicles, scooters, diesels, and airplanes. Most people I approached about the project responded with enthusiasm. Getting exposure in magazines and web-based communities, researching online and contacting people directly were all things I had to do to get the ball rolling. Ultimately, word of mouth worked the best.

I found the website for Jennifer's shop in San Francisco and painstakingly prepared an email describing who I was in hopes she would want to become involved in the project. Her response was fantastically supportive. She referred me to four other motorcycle mechanics in the city, saying:

Great project, thanks for doing it! And good for you for learning how to do your own work! That's how I got started. I am actually getting sick of people that know NOTHING about their bikes anymore, men and women alike. Unfortunately, we are a dying breed. Looking forward to working with you!

Conversations like this were very helpful in developing relationships with women before I had to meet them in person with my camera in hand. I interviewed them and learned of their histories in preparation to include their stories in the calendar.

When I was finally ready to prepare my bike for the journey, I realized that the coating in my tank (applied by a radiator shop five years ago) had begun to flake. Not wanting to leave off schedule, I tried flushing it with muratic acid, which created a huge mess and caused the tank to flash rust. So I cleaned the carburetors, installed in-line fuel filters, and crossed my fingers. Everything happens for a reason, right?

The first day's ride from Louisville to Lawrence, Kansas, went wonderfully, but the next day I found myself in a park in the Middle-of-Nowhere, Kansas, cleaning rust particles from the fuel filters and carburetor bowls. I had all of the necessary tools with me, so the maintenance wasn't a problem, but the situation did not bode well for the upcoming days of riding to my first destination of Reno. I did not want to be late to meet the two mechanics I had scheduled to photograph there!

cleaning the carburetors



Yamaha on the lift... again

At a picnic table in Colorado, a man in an electric wheelchair struck up conversation with me. His advice to me as I was about to ride away was simple: Enjoy every minute of it. I was, even during the terribly hot and windy ride through Kansas. Hearing it from someone not able to ride made that sentiment hit home pretty hard. Even during miserable times, I knew how lucky I was to be able to ride across the country in pursuit of my dreams.

Early in the morning during a rainstorm in Wyoming, the bike died on highway 80, and I luckily coasted to a stop at a truck pullover. Again, clogged fuel filters were the culprit. I looked pitiful in my giant, ill-fitting rain suit, with all of

my bags strewn about and the fuel tank off the bike. A truck driver stopped and offered help. My first reaction was to think, *uh-oh, what does this person want from me?* But after allowing my intuition to assess the situation, I joined Chris in his cab for a cup of coffee. Meeting him turned out to be a blessing, because he connected me with Brandie and Chrissy, two diesel mechanics from different shops who had worked on his truck in Lincoln, Nebraska. And his sincerity was a reminder that not everyone is out to get you on the road. I will never forget his obsession with safety that he developed after driving six million miles during his long career.



Chris, 6 million miles driven

After I had dried off from two days of riding in the rain through Wyoming, the air of Utah and the back roads of Nevada were a welcome repose. Arriving in Reno after six days of traveling, I met my first mechanic of the journey. Karen is a UPS jet airplane mechanic who began her career in the army twenty years ago working on tanks. She also has been riding motorcycles since childhood. Karen gave me a thorough and informative tour of the UPS Carrier Jet she was working on that day. Her enthusiasm and support for the project were the perfect introduction to the month of meetings I had ahead of me.

While in Reno during my continued communication with Jennifer, she connected me with a mechanic who had been her apprentice. Kim was now working in Nevada on her own as a certified BMW motorcycle mechanic. I called Kim out of the blue and luckily after explaining my story she agreed to be involved. I rode the Yamaha to her house late one evening where we ended up hanging out in her cozy garage sharing cheap beer and talking about working on bikes for hours.

sunset in Reno



I had the good fortune to have a riding companion from Reno to San Francisco with my mechanic Celeste who owns her own automobile repair shop and has been working on cars since 1980. Celeste rides a BMW and suggested we travel the back roads to San Francisco together. Although I am used to riding alone, I found that traveling with another rider proved to be fun and memorable. Getting a chance to spend extended time with this mechanic and hear her stories about riding her bicycle through Utah and Nevada while in search of the “feminist utopia” when she was twenty was especially inspiring. After a challenging ride through the countryside of Cali-

fornia, Celeste escorted me into San Francisco, where I met up with Franzi at the Bikeyard.

During my busy schedule in San Francisco meeting four mechanics there, I managed to have a couple of relaxed social evenings at a bar in the Mission District. One of those inebriated evenings I left my motorcycle parked near the club, and felt ecstatic to find it was still there the next morning. However, someone had taken a brick to my number three spark plug, presumably to break it off for use as an implement to smoke drugs. Luckily, I had extra spark plugs in my tool bag, and the bike started up fine (after a few kicks, which seemed to be my method of operation due to the rusted fuel tank situation...).

At Desmoto Sport, a shop that specializes in Italian motorcycles, I met with Lucy and Kerry who have been coworkers there for two years. There I was graciously offered space to work on my bike and remove the carburetors for a good cleaning. The owner, Scott Jenkins, lended a hand when I needed it, and flattered me by offering me a job after I had spent the day working on the Yamaha at his shop. I continually ask myself why I haven't moved to San Francisco!

I finally met and photographed Jennifer at Werkstatt in the Mission District, where the atmosphere was hectic as she was working through a long service list to prepare her rider's bike for the races at Laguna Seca. Later that week I had the pleasure of traveling to Monterey and documenting her experience in the pits as a mechanic and sponsor for a rider who was racing in the AMA Nationals. Laguna Seca is one of the most famous racetracks in the world and was expecting record crowds due to the internationally famous Motorcycle Grand Prix event there that weekend.

brick breaks my #3 spark plug



with Celeste in San Francisco

Though I felt lucky for the opportunity to attend the Moto GP Race, spending more time with Jennifer and witnessing her in action working on the race bike was the best part of the experience. During the evenings sitting around campfires drinking beer with friends we actually got to talk about more than just motorcycles. This was when Jennifer learned my story and motivations for embarking on this project. I'm glad that I was able to become more than

just a photographer to her -- someone she could relate to as a strong and motivated woman like herself. It wasn't until our phone conversation weeks later that I learned the extent of the impression my journey made on her, and her honest reaction brought the importance of what I am doing into perspective.

Unfortunately, my time at Laguna Seca was cut short due to a nasty bout of poison oak I contracted while camping at the track. I thought I was so lucky to have found a place to pitch my tent under a tree, but I ended up fleeing to Big Sur where I holed up in a tiny motel room by the beach and sat around naked, miserable, and itching for a couple of days trying to figure out a plan of attack. I couldn't ride down to Phoenix as planned — the temperatures were in the hundreds and heat only irritated the sores. At a local clinic where I finally got a shot of steroids a doctor told me that it would be at least a week before I was healed.

my lovely campsite overlooking
the track...



Jennifer working at the races

I finally decided to use the most useful tool in my bag — the BMW Owners Anonymous Book. Although my Yamaha does not disguise well as a BMW, the phone numbers listed in the book are of folks from all around the country who are willing to help a distressed motorcycle rider. Every item I had including the inside of my helmet needed to be cleaned of poison oak oils; I realized what I really needed was a place to rest along with some TLC.

The book showed a handful of numbers in nearby Monterey and the second household I called got back to me immediately, offering to help without hesitation. When I arrived at Ron and Donna's house I was treated with compassion and spent the afternoon doing laundry and cleaning my luggage with alcohol. They treated me to dinner at a restaurant on the Bay, and I relaxed in a tub of oatmeal that evening. Yet another experience demonstrating the kindness of strangers!

From Monterey my journey led me back to Reno, where still recovering from the poison oak (it was really bad) I stored my motorcycle and caught a plane

to Phoenix. There I rented a car and met with four other mechanics, including Katie at Mad Dog Motorcycles near Palm Springs. I thought about how glad I was to not be riding my bike in the 110-degree weather through Arizona as I returned to Nevada via airplane.

Back on the motorcycle riding home from Reno I stopped in Lincoln, Nebraska where I met with the two diesel mechanics I had learned about from the truck driver on that rainy day in Wyoming. Though I had to deal with hurdles of human resources at the companies where they worked, my confidence in defending the validity of my project had grown from the experience I gained meeting with mechanics and strangers who were so supportive.

While cruising through back roads of Indiana on my way home, I couldn't believe that I had actually completed my goal of finding more than enough women mechanics around the country for a calendar. The opportunity to learn these women's stories was more inspiring than I could have imagined, and I feel that I made positive connections with many of them. I'm glad to be able to represent their stories in a format that will be viewed on walls every month of the year. Riding 6000 miles through eleven states on the old Yamaha, and I'm ready to meet more mechanics and do it all over again next summer.



Bonnieville Salt Flats, Utah

2007 Female Mechanics
Calendar
\$20

order online:
www.sarahlyon.com/calendar

For more information about the project, or if you know of any mechanics who would like to be included in a future calendar, please contact me:

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