

Volunteer ensures breast cancer researchers have full tank of funding thanks to annual Harley ride

The thunder of more than 2,000 motorcycles in one place may sound intimidating to some. To Mary Mueller, it sounds like hope.

Mueller is one of the founders of Ridin' to a Cure, a motorcycle pledge ride that has raised about \$3 million in 13 years for breast cancer research. The Medical College of Wisconsin has been a grateful recipient of much of that funding.

The ride is a volunteer success story dating back to the creation of the Rock River Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) chapter in 1994. Mueller worked for Hal and Kirk Topel, who purchased the Harley-Davidson dealership in Watertown (now called Wisconsin Harley-Davidson in Oconomowoc). There she met Diane Tidball, whom she approached with the idea of a fund-raising ride for a chapter event. It was well received.

"We were a very small chapter, 40-45 members," Mueller said. "The first year of the ride, September 1995, was our first experience at fund-raising, and we had hoped to raise about \$500. We raised over \$55,000."

Although the turnout was large, the event operations were modest. Mueller and Tidball co-chaired the ride for the first few years, working all day and well into the nights creating marketing materials, soliciting merchandise for prizes, booking bands and food suppliers, and coordinating volunteers. As the event grew, so did volunteer involvement.

"The Rock River chapter members have always been generous in their time and continue to step forward to volunteer in so many venues to make the ride the success it is," Mueller said. "Without those dedicated members, there would have been many challenges."

Proceeds from the ride now benefit the Rock



Mary Mueller

River Cancer Research Foundation, which handles gift distribution. Mueller is a member of the foundation's all-volunteer board and has been treasurer since its inception. She continues to help plan Ridin' to a Cure. History, she said, has provided the motivation for putting her heart and soul into this cause.

"Looking back over the years of medical and scientific research, I thought that there was not enough done for women, diseases and other medical issues," she said. "At the time, there was most certainly not enough research being done for breast cancer, and it was and still is a leading killer of women. When this ride started, I was adamant that the money needed to be used for research. We need to eradicate breast cancer, and we do not use the money for anything but that."

Mueller's reasons for supporting breast cancer research were not personal at first, but meeting survivors and family members changed that.

"When we started this ride, I did not know

anyone that had breast cancer; no one in my family has ever been afflicted by it," she said. "Today, I don't even want to think about the number of people I have met who have had it or are currently going through treatment."

To accomplish its ongoing goal of finding a cure for breast cancer by funding promising research studies, the Rock River Cancer Research Foundation has found a like-minded partner in the Medical College of Wisconsin.

"The Medical College has afforded us a viable place to help carry out our goal of breast cancer research," Mueller said. "I believe that the participants in the ride take pride in the fact that the money they raise stays at an excellent research facility right in our backyard. We also appreciate that the research doctors take time to come to the ride and speak to the riders. I believe that helps share in the ownership of what we are doing with all the participants and chapter members."

Mary and her partner, John Smurawa, have been together more than eight years and own Roux Brothers, a restaurant in Cedarburg where John is chef. When she's not volunteering, Mary is Accounting Manager for Engineered Exhaust Systems in New Berlin.

The 14th annual Ridin' to a Cure was expected to take place on Sept. 27 this year. When Mueller and John open the throttle of their 100th Anniversary Road King, she continues to hear the rumble of hope and can't help but recall that first event in 1995, as bike after bike rolled into the dealership to begin the ride.

"The support of the biker community to fight breast cancer is my best memory, and it still overwhelms me every year," she said. "I still cry every year. I cry when I see the riders on *their* ride. You have to love 'em."