

REAL HEROES

Picking the 2011 AMA Motorcyclist of the Year



By Rob Dingman

I've never been more proud to be an AMA member than I was on May 26.

That's when a couple hundred of the AMA's most active, vocal and engaged members converged on the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C., to drive home a simple message: Fix the "lead law" that denies the sale of dirtbikes and ATVs to youth riders.

To realize the impact that these AMA members had, you have to understand what usually happens in the meeting rooms of that

building. Typically, the rooms are filled with adults in dark suits and skirts, talking in subdued tones, working through a very mundane interplay that involves either reading or listening to scripted words designed to influence legislators on a particular issue. Such meetings are important, and they help shape our laws, but they're anything but "exciting." They're not engaging. They are, in a word, routine.

AMA members turned that routine upside down on a hot Thursday at the AMA Family Capitol Hill Climb. The arrival of so many regular citizens, including a majority of kids—nearly all wearing colorful motocross gear—created an uplifting attitude, and a sense of energy. More than anything else, they drove home the point that not fixing a bad law that threatened to end kids' motorcycling would have a very real impact on a vibrant, fun and family friendly activity. This was not business as usual in Washington.

It got attention. It got results. And it helped end three years of inaction by legislators to fix the law. Only 11 weeks after the AMA Family Capitol Hill Climb, Congress created, and the president signed, a law that removed the restriction on the sale of kids' dirtbikes and ATVs.

That's the power of grassroots activism.

The fact that "regular" people drove the process makes it the most powerful form of political engagement. The people who filled that room weren't paid lobbyists. They weren't suits. They were real riders, real families and real AMA members who were moved to act. They fixed the law. In doing so, they even earned an exemption in the law for specific products—motorcycles and ATVs—that no other group was able to achieve.

The AMA Motorcyclist of the Year designation recognizes the rider who had the most impact on the world of motorcycling in the previous 12 months. When it came time to select that individual,



there was no question that the biggest issue facing motorcyclists in 2011 was the lead law. And its defeat represents the largest legislative victory for motorcyclists in more than a decade.

There were lots of groups, from the motorcycle manufacturing side, to the race promotion side, to other motorcycle activist organizations, who helped bring about the change. Everyone's work was vital to our shared success. But from my perspective, the ones who really turned the tide were the grassroots AMA members and riders who wrote letters and emails, called and visited their congressmembers, and even turned the Rayburn building's routine morning into something very special on that day in May.

So many AMA members had a hand in the victory that it was tough to single out one as the AMA Motorcyclist of the Year. In the end, the decision rested on two factors. The amount of work done by the individual chosen, and the fact that she was just a "regular" rider who was moved to join the fight not because her business was threatened or her livelihood was at stake, but because she saw an injustice and wanted to fix it.

Nancy Sabater, a Maryland rider who's been around motorcycles, racetracks and trails since she was 15, is the 2011 AMA Motorcyclist of the Year. A motorcyclist whose fiancé raced at nearby tracks and rode with her in the woods for years, Sabater doesn't have children herself, but realizes the importance of motorcycling to kids. She saw how motorcycling brings families together. She knew that motorsports helps kids grow in positive ways. And perhaps most importantly, she knew that if a generation of kids were denied motorcycles, an entire way of life could be lost forever.

Sabater's involvement went beyond just writing letters, as you'll see in the story on page 32. She organized petition drives. She mobilized others. She visited with congressmembers to lobby them directly to change the law.

Of course, while Sabater may be the visible face of grassroots activism on the cover of this magazine, it's important to realize that every AMA member who acted to defeat the lead law also shares this individual award. Like many involved in the fight, Sabater is quick to note that a victory like this doesn't happen solely from the actions of a single individual. It's about all motorcyclists, AMA members and others in the motorcycle industry, standing together.

In the end, that's something we can all be proud of.

Rob Dingman is president and CEO of the AMA.

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