

Harley-Davidson dealership owners rev up for Homecoming 2008

by Sheryl Hanson - Wednesday, May 21, 2008

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Logging 100,000 miles a year in flights as president of SII Investments in Appleton, **Pete Johnson** '89 and '93 MBA had achieved a level of business success few people ever find. But he was missing something — the kind of relaxation found only on a motorcycle.

So he changed his life.

In 2005, he left the corporate world and set out to build a new business with partner Lori Thiel. After much research and networking with Harley-Davidson dealers, they found a dealership that needed new owners in Fond du Lac.

Ironically, the two were on the road to Sturgis — on bikes, of course — when they got the call from the corporate Harley-Davidson office, asking if they were still interested in taking over the Fond du Lac dealership.

They changed the name to Open Road Harley-Davidson and opened their doors in January 2007.

“It made perfect sense to go into business for myself and work in an industry I believe in,” Johnson said.

Last month, Johnson and Thiel hosted a reception for UW Oshkosh alumni and friends at Open Road, 24 S. Rolling Meadows Drive, where the Alumni Office also shared plans for a Harley-Davidson-themed Homecoming on Oct. 18.

Alumni Director Christine Gantner said the popularity of motorcycling among alumni such as Johnson helped inspire the theme.

“You don’t need a motorcycle to join in the fun,” she added. “We are welcoming everyone who has two-wheel transportation to ride in the parade or watch it.”

That includes all makes and models, including scooters and bicycles.

The Harley-Davidson theme doesn’t end there. The traditional pre-game celebration at Tent City will feature plenty of hog — barbecued pork, that is. [Click here](#) for more Homecoming 2008 details.

Growing up on a motorbike inspired business

Like many motorcycle enthusiasts, Johnson has ridden motorbikes since he was very young. At age 5, he joined his dad and four brothers nearly every Saturday for riding, competing and jumping, which all began on a Fox mini-bike.

“Every week, my dad would give my mom a break by taking my brothers and me out riding. We started with mini-bikes and eventually worked our way up to motorcycles,” he said.

When he was 11, he was getting tired of sharing a bike with his brothers. So his dad made him an offer he couldn't refuse: Fix a broken-down mini-bike, and it is yours. He took the entire bike apart in the basement. Then he put it back together and got it running.

“That is Pete's thing,” Thiel said. “He is the guy who can assess and fix things. He is a solution-based person with a very abstract mind. He truly is a holistic, strong leader.”

Thiel, as vice president, is the company's operations expert, spokesperson, and marketing and human resources manager. Johnson said that she perfectly complements his skill set.

The two met — where else? — at a Sturgis campground. They found they had grown up in Appleton around the same time but had never met.

“We found we had a lot of the same values and interest, and we both had a love for riding,” she said.

It seems the two were destined to meet. Thiel spent 20 years working in the same industry as Johnson — Northwestern Mutual Financial Network — and grew up riding dirt bikes in Hilbert. She always had aspired to own a business.

“I was at a point in my career when I wanted a new challenge, and people told me to find something I am passionate about,” she said. “And here I am.”

The experience is everything

Johnson's goal, he said, is not to have the largest Harley-Davidson dealership, but to have the best.

“We set ourselves apart because our goal is not just moving product. It is getting to know customers on a first-name basis,” he said. “We really believe in customizing the experience for every one of them — novices, youth, experienced riders and women.”

The recent surge in fuel prices has brought more new customers than ever before through Open Road's doors, so knowledgeable, customer-centric employees are critical to success.

Open Road has 31 permanent employees on the payroll. From the beginning, Johnson and Thiel have prided themselves in maintaining very low employee turnover, which builds customer trust.

“Many of our employees are riders themselves, so they have the credibility,” Johnson said. “If you have a wonderful place to work, you have a great company.”

In April, Open Road hosted its annual Ride for Pride, which raised funds for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, Lion's Pride Campaign, and the Cops for Kids Foundation and Solution Center.

Open Road also is sponsoring a UW Oshkosh Homecoming raffle to benefit the Titan Touchdown Club.

Each \$20 raffle ticket earns a chance at winning a Harley-Davidson Rocker C and many other prizes. For more information on the raffle, visit www.openroadhd.com.

Inspired by faculty

Johnson's education at UW Oshkosh gave him the tools to set out confidently in the business world. And with an undergraduate degree in psychology, he has found interpersonal skills especially valuable.

"Those skills have helped me become more intuitive and relate better to people," he said. "We get people from all walks of life in our doors, and I feel I can relate well to all of them."

Johnson's favorite professor at UW Oshkosh was business professor B.S. Sridhar.

Even after nearly 20 years, the lessons Johnson learned from Sridhar still sound clearly in his mind.

"I think about him now and then," he said. "He taught me to think outside the box and be more innovative. He also taught me that change is OK and anything is possible."

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