



# Changing Gears Rider Profile

## Karen Richards

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New Rider

A little over two years ago, when I was 41, I found a lump in my right breast. Nine days later, on Valentines Day, I was diagnosed: three tumors, two kinds of cancer, three different grades, all stage one, but one borderline stage 2. I was convinced that I was riddled with cancer, and that I had just been dealt a death sentence. It was the most terrifying day of my life.

After much research, I opted for a bilateral mastectomy with reconstruction, followed by chemo and five years on tamoxifen. Twenty-three lymph nodes in total were removed, and none showed any sign of cancer. While that was the best possible news, I've been struggling for the last year with lymphedema in both arms – a fairly common, though not widely understood, chronic condition that can result from having a damaged lymphatic system.

From the beginning, my cancer was a wake up call. It was clear to me that I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing in my life, and I felt that if I didn't figure it out, the cancer would eventually win. I realized that there were many important experiences in my past that I had never come to terms with – from traumatic events to unhealthy relationships. I had always put the needs of others ahead of my own, and had been carrying a tremendous emotional burden for decades. I started to explore and understand the connection between mind and body and learned about the evidence indicating that harboring negative emotions can be incredibly toxic and can contribute to disease.

I explored different complementary therapies including homeopathy, holistic medicine, acupuncture and Chinese medicine – and continued working with my therapist. I was determined not to let cancer take over my life so I continued my progress toward a long abandoned bachelor's degree in Computer Science, which I finished while recovering from surgery. The summer I was undergoing chemotherapy, I started a graduate program for my Masters in Computer Science – attending classes on Friday nights, including those after each of my chemo treatments.

Last summer, I left my marriage of 7 years. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but one of the most important and pivotal. From that point, I moved, found a new job and started a new life. In the process, I met a wonderful man and we started riding on his motorcycle together. I loved being on the motorcycle, because riding exactly mirrored the new feelings of freedom I was experiencing. Today, we are still riding together and I'm having the time of my life. I've got a great job as an office and project manager for an exciting start-up human capital consulting company called Capital H Group, and I'm finishing that Masters degree.

Over the last 2 ½ years, I've been involved with a variety of breast cancer groups and causes. I took advantage of programs at Y-Me and Gilda's Club, and am still involved with Gilda's as an outreach volunteer. Last summer, after three months of training, my best friend of 30 years and I walked 39 miles in the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer with an incredible group of women, and this past summer, I participated as a crew member. I'll walk again next year.

I found out about Changing Gears the same day Nathan and I got back from my first long motorcycle trip – a 500 mile, 5-day adventure. The idea of spending a week with an amazing group of fellow survivors, riding Harleys, raising awareness and sharing a once-in-a-lifetime experience that will be so challenging and rewarding in body and spirit appeals to me on so many levels. Mostly though, being on a motorcycle epitomizes my survival, making me feel strong, independent and most importantly – alive; something I haven't taken for granted for one minute since that Valentines Day in 2002.