

Executive Director ABATE of Wisconsin  
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### Common Misperceptions

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Normally when I think of those words I'm referring to another unjust, freedom taking bill that has been reworded and reintroduced in yet another legislative session to add another law to the books. Since ABATE of WI began in 1974, we've used many of the same arguments to fight against many of these same bills. Unlike our counter parts in the government, ABATE of WI has used the downtime in between introduction of these unjust bills to further our other missions of safety and education. It seems our efforts have paid off most recently in seeing that last year motorcyclists in the state had the fewest accidents, fatalities, and injuries that we've seen in the last decade. But, I'm not referring to a new bill that has been introduced, but rather public perception of motorcyclists and what the general public is led to believe about our culture. Do we need to change? No, I don't think so. But, I think there are some simple things we can do to change the minds of those who have never experienced the same freedoms we feel in the wind.

Although you may think that I should be writing about the critical nature of the information that we need to present to legislators on our rescheduled lobby day coming up soon on April 23, or the fact that with some unusually warm spring weather many of us have taken to the roads and we should start promoting awareness. Since I'm sure several of our officers have covered these topics in this newsletter I'm going to shift to a different subject, one you don't see in this publication often and one that I haven't written about in a while; public perception.

The whole idea for this article came about a few years ago when my friend Tony "Pan" invited me to the Harley-Davidson museum to see some members from one of the oldest motorcycle clubs in America give a presentation. Four members of the Boozefighters M/C spoke to a crowd of over one hundred about the beginnings of motorcycle clubs in the United States. They told the story about their original members being WWII vets and motorcycle racers that happened to also share a passion for drinking a lot of beer. This story is not new to me as I know many patch holders and many of their clubs were started for similar reasons, which all seem to be more about biking and brotherhood than anything. If you've never heard of the Boozefighters, I would bet that you're a few years younger than me. They are not only one of the first motorcycle clubs in the U.S., but also lay claim to being the club that the Marlon Brando movie "The Wild Ones" was modeled after. This stemmed from an alleged and completely false portrayal of scoundrel bikers during the Hollister Rally in 1947. The staged photographs and "eyewitness" accounts that were published in Harpers Bazaar and Life Magazine about the Hollister event set the stage for the misperceptions the public continues to have to this day about motorcyclists. Although those there agreed that everyone drank a lot and had a lot of fun, the published media accounts of bikers "taking over the town" and "terrifying the locals" were terribly misrepresented. And, it was alarming to see the similarities between that event sixty-three years ago, and events we hold today. I don't think the media has

changed their view much either, and everyone knows that news has to have an exciting edge to it or it just wouldn't be news. How much do you think the media in this country leads the way in misrepresenting bikers?

Now many of us may be guilty of feeding the fire of biker misperception by either being apathetic or even supporting some of the recent biker movies and television shows, most namely "Sons of Anarchy" (it is now done forever I hope). I admittedly don't know any club members outside of the Midwest, so maybe clubs in California kill people on a daily basis, stab their brothers in the back, run guns, and party every day and night, but I doubt it. And although many find it entertaining, I think the show and the people that wear stupid shirts like they're members of some fictitious club do more to hurt the public's perception of bikers than any real club could ever do. What do your neighbors or children's classmates think of bikers? Are you doing anything to change their perception?

ABATE of Wisconsin may not have the answers to everything that plagues our culture, but we are doing many things to try to change the public's perception of bikers without changing bikers and I hope you feel the need to speak up and act out to support the lifestyle you've grown accustomed to.

One of the biggest things we do to not only change public perception but to keep us all safer on the road is teach our motorcycle awareness class, Share the Road, in drivers education classrooms throughout the state. ABATE member volunteers are always needed to teach this program and the face time you get with these young people will surely make a deep impression on them for life. Many of our members volunteer to help political candidates during election time and since we are a fairly bi-partisan organization this is the perfect opportunity to change the perception people from all walks of life have of us when we work along side them to help a candidate that you believe in. How we conduct ourselves at our Capitol is an important part of how not only legislators but the public perceives us. It's not how we dress that keeps people talking in Madison, it's how well we present our issues and the professionalism that we show that has gained us respect there.

Unless you live in a community of bikers, your children (or at least their friends) probably have some huge misperceptions of who we are. We have the opportunity to change that every time we are just ourselves without changing our attitude or appearance to conform to what our community may think everyone should look like and act. I taught my children long ago not to judge a book by its cover and in turn they've led their friends to see things the same. This may be the best opportunity for us to change public perception of our image: let the kids do it.


No matter what you'd like to believe, change doesn't come easy and it doesn't come quick. If bikers want to change the misperceptions that the general public have been putting together for the last sixty years we need to get started. Whether its making sure everyone knows you're a biker when you volunteer in your community, or being involved as an instructor in a Share the Road class, we need to give the public something to believe besides the crap they've been hearing for six decades. Hollister just isn't a popular clothing line, it was a great biker event made infamous to sell magazines. We need to show people that just because we prefer jeans and leather to khaki and ties, doesn't make us a lesser part of our communities.

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