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THE WINDSOR STAR

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AUTO, Page: B1 / FRONT

Helping riders take final ride

Bike enthusiast owns Forever Free Motorcycle Hearse Co.

Ellen van Wageningen, The Windsor Star

It wasn't even his idea.

But the more George Winney thought about it, the more convinced he became that this was what he wanted do when he retired after 31 years working in Ford of Canada's Windsor plants.

He would give motorcycle enthusiasts like himself their final ride to the rumbling music of a Harley-Davidson engine.

Two years later, Winney is the owner of Forever Free Motorcycle Hearse Company and has carried his first client to his final resting place.

"I was a bit nervous, but I played it over in my head many, many times," he said of his first funeral on Aug. 8. "I kept telling myself, 'George, slow and easy. Double check everything.' "

It was raining and there were already a couple dozen bikes in the parking lot of Windsor's Families First Funeral Home and Tribute Centre when Winney, wearing a black duster coat and helmet, pulled up. He parked his 1998 Harley-Davidson police special with the custom-made, casket-carrying sidecar under the canopy at the entrance.

An hour later, Winney led a funeral procession of 75 motorcycles to Heavenly Rest Cemetery, where 66-year-old Stanley Kuron's family and friends said their final goodbyes. "My spirit as a biker will always be there for my friends," said his obituary. "The lone wolf riding in the wind."

Kuron got his first bike when he was 17. After his retirement from Chrysler, he often rode his three-wheel Harley to Laurier Drive and Mayfair Avenue in LaSalle, where he was a crossing guard, said his son, John Kuron.

He'd seen Winney's motorcycle hearse at a Harley Owners Group gathering and mentioned to friends that is how he wanted to take his final ride, his son said.

Winney's service fills a niche at a time when funerals increasingly are focused on celebrating the lives of the deceased, especially their passions and hobbies, said Brian Parent, owner of Families First and president of the Ontario Funeral Service Association. "Those are important things in people's lives and people want them there to depict their lives."

Winney, who paid his respects and went to Kuron's wake, said it's the way he envisions his service being used by the families of bikers from all over southern Ontario.

"It's very special to me to do something like this for the motorcycle community. In my mind, I'm paying homage to them," said Winney, 60, who bought his first Harley in 1972.

He is another lone wolf. He never joined any clubs. A few close friends and Valerie, his wife of 23 years, have been his only biking companions. He's owned four Harleys, including the motorcycle hearse and a 1978 model in mint condition that he keeps for personal use.

There's a "Harley room" in his Clemenceau Boulevard home filled with hog photos and knick-knacks, including a Lego bike and another that's a lamp that roars when it's turned on.

"He can take apart a Harley and put it back together with his eyes closed," Valerie said.

But it would take more than a passion for bikes and the open road to get the motorcycle hearse business off the ground.

Winney estimates he has sunk \$50,000 into it, so far. Insurance alone costs \$3,600 a year.

He bought a former Windsor police bike from an acquaintance. Ford co-worker Dennis Quenville built the wooden base for the hearse. Rob Molner, an employee of Atlas Tube, fabricated the sidecar, which can be raised to put the coffin in place. The accessories were made by DNR Industries of Waterloo.

"I wanted a lot of chrome," Winney said. "I don't like cleaning it, but I like the look of it."

Earlier this year, he started taking the motorcycle hearse to shows and biker gatherings. After the first show, he realized he needed a casket. He's been using a plain wooden coffin made by a friend, but for future shows, he's having made a black, old fashioned, leather-lined "cowboy" coffin, which narrows at the feet. It's the one in which Winney hopes to take his final ride.

Forever Free charges \$500 for a funeral, plus travel expenses if it is outside Essex County.

"I have to do quite a few of them to break even," but it was never the goal to get rich, Winney said.

"I kind of started on this road. I don't know where it's going to take me. I'm just trying to figure it out."

The credit for the idea goes to fellow Ford worker and motorcyclist Bob Arpen, who scoured the Internet to find Winney examples of other places where it had been done. Winney asked for Arpen's permission before he decided. Arpen told him to go ahead, "but promise me one thing: if I die first, my ride is free."

For information about Forever Free, visit www.foreverfree.biz

ONLINE: windsorstar.com

See a photo gallery and a video by Dan Janisse of the motorcycle hearse.

ILLUS: Colour Photo: Dan Janisse, The Windsor Star / George Winney has started a motorcycle hearse business. The retired Ford worker is shown here next to the custom-built unit. ; Colour Photo: Handout / Family and friends of Stanley Kuron look on as his casket on the motorcycle hearse driven by George Winney leads the procession from Families First Funeral Home and Tribute Centre in Windsor. ;