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Motorcycle Safety and Awareness month is wrapping up. By now, if you're like me, I am tired of reading the same five or ten safety tips from a myriad of sources. Don't get me wrong; the safety messaging and its vast promotion across the country are a large part of what we need to push motorcycle safety to the forefront the other 11 months of the year. I have seen more safety and awareness articles, posters and social media posts than ever in my life. But I can't help but think we are missing a huge piece of the puzzle: drivers of cars. I arrived at this deduction by listening to drivers of cars of all ages discuss motorcycles. While waiting for my car to be repaired, I used Lyft for three weeks. Drivers always asked what I did for a living and typically when I told them I worked for a motorcycle accident law firm, a conversation ensued. Here are a few excerpts from those conversations:

by Jackie Eldridge

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Riders are dangerous people

"Isn't that dangerous? Aren't you afraid of Hell's Angels? Those motorcycle guys scare me. And the way they drive," said the early twenty-something, male driver I'll call Tommy. I was telling Tommy that that's a big misconception about motorcycle riders, I gave him the bigger picture of the freedom and joy a bike provides its rider, as well as the tight, meaningful camaraderie of motorcycle clubs that raise millions of dollars each year for wonderful causes. And of course, their rugged individuality.

After I shared this with him, he said, "Wait! Now I remember when I had to pull off the freeway because the trailer hitch was slipping. Before I got out of my car, a guy on a bike had stopped, fixed my hitch (I had the pin in wrong) and rode off with a wave and a smile. I guess they are a pretty nice group. I've always been a little frightened by them. It's just the clothes. All that leather." I asked what he'd rather be wearing when his bike crashed…his Dockers and a polo or leathers? "Well, I guess, leather. Now it makes sense to me. I thought they were just trying to look tough."

By the time I arrived at my destination, I had a new motorcycle advocate.

One woman went on and on about how motorcycle riders weave in and out of traffic, just looking for trouble. She also mentioned that they speed ALL THE TIME! "No wonder they get in accidents!" It was senseless for me to try to explain to her that what appeared to be weaving to her was actually defensive driving. And speeding? Motorcycles typically can ride closer to the speed limit when cars are slowed down or stopped in traffic, often seeming like speeding.

Aha moment indeed. Safety and awareness advocates are doing everything right, with the exception of educating drivers of cars (beyond two questions on the driver license exam), who remain the number one cause of motorcycle accidents and fatalities. To reduce the number of motorcycle accidents and fatalities, we have to rethink the way we educate drivers of cars. When a 16-year-old earns a new driver license, the test needs to include a section on motorcycle safety. Not just a video reinforcing look twice; it needs to be a type of training where the potential new driver can experience the road from the eyes of a rider. A simulation or training videos, even a video game. Gaining an understanding of how and why motorcyclists drive the way they do could very well be the missing link for reducing motorcycle accidents and fatalities.

AMF has a program called Commitment to Safety, Family and Friends that drivers, new or seasoned, read, initial and sign to indicate their commitment to safety of the road. It's a start, but only as effective as the commitment behind the signature. You can download the document here.

Another thought is to retrofit older cars and bikes—a project for an aftermarket developer, perhaps. The unfortunate part of my aha moment is that most decisions to change law or systems is based on numbers. In the US, the annual estimate of motorcycle fatalities is 5,000, while the total of motorcycle accidents hovers near 90,000.

Contact your state representative or congressman to discuss a change in the licensing of drivers in your state. It will take time and tenacity, but it can be done. If it's numbers they want, let's get out in droves to change the future of motorcycle safety and awareness in the US. Think about the lives you might save.

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