Easy Rider
by Rick Ferguson

Ralph "Benny" Suggs, General Manager of the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) and Rider Services for Milwaukee, Wisconsin-based Harley-Davidson Motor Company, is easy to underestimate. It’s obvious that he loves working for Harley-Davidson, and he possesses the type of big, expansive, welcoming personality that puts strangers at ease and can readily turn Harley skeptics into true believers. This is a guy who could get your grandmother on a Harley motorcycle.

What you may not know about Benny, who possesses the understated modesty that comes only from a well-lived life, is that his role as H.O.G. GM is actually his second act. Before joining the Harley-Davidson executive team in January 2000, Suggs had another life as a career Navy man. He picked up the nickname "Benny" as a naval aviator undergoing advanced jet training at Naval Air Station, Kingsville, Texas. He rose to the rank of two-star Rear Admiral in the U.S. Navy, but when he was promoted to Vice Admiral, he opted for a career change.

What makes a man destined for the Pentagon take a detour that would see him riding Harley-Davidson motorcycles cross-country for a living? To hear Suggs tell it, it was simple love for the Harley-Davidson brand.

"I was in the Special Operations Command, the number-two guy in charge," says Suggs, "when I was the recipient of phone call from the Chief of Naval Personnel. He said, ‘Benny, congratulations—you’re getting orders to Washington D.C. You’re getting a third star.’ This was not good news to me. I was an operator, and I had no desire to do anything other than operate and work and fly with the troops. So when I asked myself, ‘What could I do for a Chapter Two?’ I looked out at the parking lot and saw my 1998 Harley Heritage Springer. And I said, ‘Well, I could do what I’ve been doing for 30 years—work with the best people in the world who are passionate, committed and who understand what they’re doing and how important it is. Harley-Davidson was the obvious choice.’"

That the choice was obvious was due largely to Suggs’s lifelong love affair with Harley-Davidson motorcycles. He rode his first Harley when he was eight years old, living on his grandfather’s farm outside of Wilmington, North Carolina.

"It was my granddad’s 1955 FL Hydra-Glide, a beautiful one in good working order," says Suggs. "It had a Buddy Seat on it, and he would take me out on Saturday afternoons and he would scare the [stuffing] out of me. I loved it. That was my first experience in becoming an adrenaline junkie, and nothing has changed."

Suggs inherited that 1955 Hydra-Glide and drove it through college. He bought his first new Harley-Davidson motorcycle in 1992—a 1993 Wide Glide with flaming-eagle decals emblazoned on its tear-drop fuel tank—and has owned about 12 Harley motorcycles in his life. He became a regular at Harley-Davidson events, and as fate would have it, made the acquaintance of Motor Company CEO Jeff Bleustein, who told Suggs to look him up if he ever wanted to make a career change. In 1999, Suggs gave him a call—and the rest is history.

Today, Suggs helps Harley-Davidson influence and measure customer engagement through the simplest of metrics—the odometer click. Harley-Davidson knows that the more owners hop on their bikes, the more engaged they are, and the more likely they are to become repeat buyers. The Motor Company’s customer loyalty strategy is all about fulfilling the dreams that made their
customers buy one of their motorcycles in the first place. The 800,000 U.S. H.O.G. members and 250,000 local H.O.G. chapter members have ridden over 290 million miles while participating in H.O.G.-sponsored member events. As a result of that activity, members account for over 25% of all new Harley-Davidson motorcycles purchased, spend over 80% more on Harley merchandise and visit their local dealer at least six more times in a year than non-members.

Suggs's team knows how valuable the H.O.G. experience is to its members because he is one of them. He understands that nothing can replace the experience of firing up your Harley-Davidson motorcycle for a road trip.

"Our job is to give our members a world-class ownership experience that they define," says Suggs. "We treat them with incredible respect. We ride with them. We take their ideas back to continuously enhance our products to keep them in our family forever."

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