

Riding It Out

FACED WITH A TERMINAL DIAGNOSIS, DAWN WEST WAS TOLD TO GET HER AFFAIRS IN ORDER AND PREPARE FOR DEATH; INSTEAD, SHE TOOK A DIFFERENT ROAD

By Bill Glose

Imagine going in for your annual physical and discovering you had lung cancer. Then imagine the surgeon you're referred to saying there's nothing he can do for you. If you only had a year left to live, what would you do with it? For Dawn West, a former Newport News deputy sheriff, this was no hypothetical question.

In 2001, her doctor discovered a two-centimeter spot in the pleural cavity surrounding her lung. Years earlier, she had suffered a collapsed lung. After several failed attempts to repair it, a surgeon had sprayed tetracycline between the lung and the pleura, essentially using the medicine as antibiotic superglue. Because of this, surgical procedures were too risky to be performed on that lung. Its wall would cling to the pleura and shred. Therefore, the tumor was inoperable. The doctor's only suggestion was to get her affairs in order and prepare for death. West took a different tack. She went out and bought a motorcycle.

West did not eschew medicine altogether. She got biopsies and CAT scans and PET scans. She sought second—and third—opinions, most of which repeated the first doctor's sentiment. One surgeon was willing to try a radical, new surgery that had as much chance of killing her as curing her. And if it cured her, she would live out the remainder of her life tethered to an oxygen tank. West also visited a homeopath in Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania who prescribed a daily dosage of enough herbs, vitamins and amino acids to fill a coffee mug.

But when she wasn't driving back and forth to different hospitals and clinics, West rode her motorcycle as a self-prescribed form of happiness therapy. Cruising down tree-lined streets, she forgot about her problems as she cut through the wind and steel-belted rubber hummed on asphalt.

But before West reached that state of wind-blown bliss, she had to get over a few bumps in the road. Having never ridden a motorcycle before, she took a class at Thomas Nelson Community College and got





“You have one shot with life. You have one bullet. Take very careful aim. Make it count.”

her license upgraded. No problem there. Then she had to go out and find a bike that would fit her small frame. West is a mere five feet two inches, so a big cruising bike was out of the question. She bought one of the smallest she could find, a used Honda 450. But even that stood at three feet six inches and weighed 412 pounds.

“When I realized how high the seat was on this motorcycle, I bought really high boots,” she explains with a laugh. “A high, platform kind of boot so I could have both my feet flat on the ground. Without the boots, I wasn’t big enough to hold the motorcycle up.” But even with the boots, West made a critical error as she was leaving her driveway on her maiden voyage. The driveway is sloped to the street, and when she slowed down at the dip of the driveway, “the ground just disappeared,” she says. “There I was just flailing and floundering, and my feet were swinging as I tried to get over that dip in the driveway. But ultimately I got on the other side of the dip and I was off!”

Along with boots reminiscent of the disco era, West purchased a full-face helmet, gloves and a biker jacket and pants. Sheathed in gray leather, she was an androgynous missile out on the road. One of her favorite places to stop and take a break was a cul-de-sac where two little girls were often playing in the yard. They seldom paid attention to West until one time she stopped and

flipped open her visor. *Omigosh!* they exclaimed, *you’re a girl!*

“After that,” West says, “every couple of days, whenever I was out, I would stop over there and see them, and they would tell me the latest thing from their school: ‘Girls rule and boys drool!’ And, ‘Girls go to college to get more knowledge; boys go to Jupiter to get more stupider.’ They were both about 10, and they were just as cute as they could be. They wanted to know where I lived, where I worked. When they found out I was a deputy, I was like their little hero. They would run after me down the street when I took off, yelling, ‘Bye! Bye!’ It was good for my heart.”

West needed all the good-for-her-heart moments she could find. They helped to counterbalance the inevitable moments of despair, those times when she cried herself to sleep at night, times when she felt like a milk jug with an expiration date stamped on its side. “Shortly after I was diagnosed and everyone was telling me, ‘I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do,’” she says, “I was at Lowe’s getting light bulbs for the house. They had this newfangled five-year light bulb, and I picked it up and I tossed it back on the shelf. I wouldn’t buy the damn thing. Not if it was going to live longer than me.”

Out on her motorcycle, West’s perspective was joyful, and that joy would follow her into the rest of her day. “I would come home from

my very stressful job,” she says, “and I’d ride my motorcycle and think, ‘To heck with everybody!’ Anyone who was problematic, anyone who was negative, they simply couldn’t play with me. You get to a point where you can’t be bothered with petty stuff because you’re so busy having a good time that you can’t bother with the drama and the negativity—that’s how it worked for me. And I literally put people out of my house who were being negative and difficult.”

Her optimism paid off. When she checked back in with her surgeon a few months later, the tumor in her lung had shrunk by 30 percent. Cheering in an oncology ward might be bad form, but West couldn’t help herself. She howled with delight. She high-fived her doctor. And her tears, for once, were tears of joy.

The surgery was put on hold, and on every subsequent follow-up, the tumor shrank some more. Then it disappeared. Whether her cure was due to vitamins, the motorcycle or a miracle, no one can say for sure.

“You have one shot with life,” West says. “You have one bullet. Take very careful aim. Make it count. Listen sometimes to people, to how many times they say *can’t*, *won’t*, *shouldn’t*; people incorporate those things into their daily lives, and they live what I refer to as a negative life. And most people do. Me? I’m packing in as much fun as I can.” [COVA](#)