

# Minnesota Motorcycle Monthly

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Talking With Jennie Hanlon  
E-H co-founder



by Crash Casey

## Jennie Hanlon and Her Motor Company An interview with Excelsior-Henderson's co-founder.

I've taken a certain amount of grief lately due to the fact that last month I wrote such a favorable article about my visit to Excelsior-Henderson. In fact the term love letter was bandied about several times. So here I go doing an interview with Jennie Hanlon, one of the three co-founders. But hey, why would I turn down an opportunity to talk one on one with a lovely looking woman with a great story to tell? However it unfolds we were all there on the ground level as witnesses to what might well be history being made.

*M.M.M.:* Take me back to day one, August, 1993. How was the concept born?

*J.H.:* It was born in Deadwood, SD. Dave and I had been staying in a hotel there for like 18 years. We had always stayed in the same room, Room 222, and Dan was staying next door to us in Room 223. We don't drink and drive so we decided that was the night we were going to party at the hotel. So we were sitting out



Excelsior-Henderson co-founder Jennie Hanlon at home on a new super X.

Victor Wanchenn

on the balcony having a few beers and watching motorcycles go by and it was kind of phenomenal that there was one American-made motorcycle so there wasn't much of a choice there.

We started talking about our bikes, what we liked about them and what we didn't like about them. All of a sudden it just popped into our heads all the same time...like Dave says "Well, once I wanted to work for Harley-Davidson and run a store but I don't know if I would ever want to turn my hobby into my career". Dan says "Well, we could probably manufacture motorcycles." Dave is very conservative and says "It sounds good. We would have to talk about it." I love motorcycles and anything to do with riding them is cool by me, and that is where it started.

Dave and I went back to Michigan, Dan back to Minnesota and he called about two weeks later and asked if he could talk to me, which was really strange. He came out and said "Can we persuade Dave to do this?" and I said "Well, let's try." We sat down at the table and talked about it. Those two are so business-minded that they actually started to put their business plan together right there.

*M.M.M.:* What did you do prior to that?

*J.H.:* Well, I was real fortunate. I got to stay home with my children for most of their elementary and later on for like their sixth and seventh grades. Then I went to work part time for two brothers if you can believe that. I worked as their office manager.

*M.M.M.:* What is your role in the company now and in the future?

*J.H.:* My role right now, that's a tough one to answer. I am a co-founder here so I sit in on board meetings and the meetings of the company and help make decisions and direct. But I am also what they call the Spiritual Roadcrew leader. And as you know, all our employees here are a part of the Roadcrew, that's what we call ourselves. I like to make sure that what we say is going to happen happens. Like if we say we are going to have a purchase plan for our employees then let's make sure we have that. If someone says "Are we going to get to ride the bikes we're building, can our families see them?", I am going to make sure that happens. We just had a big family reunion here. We invited all of our employees, all of the Roadcrew, all of their families to come and do demo rides. We had games and prizes for all the little kids. We had stuff for middle-age kids to do. Whoever had a license and wanted to ride, could ride. Whoever didn't have a license, we had two guys from the company volunteer to give them rides. So I really try to make sure that everything stays intact, that we don't lose our culture, that we don't lose who we want to be.

*M.M.M.:* And how about in the future? Can you see your role growing and how would it grow?

*J.H.:* I would like to see my future as not only being a Spiritual Roadcrew leader here

but also as being a Spiritual woman Roadcrew leader out in the world. Do some talking about my role and about women in motorcycling. I might be speaking a little out of text right now but I would like to contact the State and see if we can put together a training school for women. I know some women here come to me and say "I really want to ride" but they are so intimidated by the men in the classes that they are just not comfortable. I see my role growing in that direction.

**They would say, "Go away. Come back another day. This will never be done. You guys can't do this. This has never been done before." The harder the doors were slammed, the harder we pushed...then we got people who said, "You people just aren't going to go away, I think you've got something there."**

*M.M.M.:* How did you guys go about raising your initial capital?

*J.H.:* The very initial capital is real interesting because we all hocked our

motorcycles, we put them up for collateral. After we did that, we signed up for every single credit card we could and we got all the money we could get out of each one. And then we moved here (Minnesota) and got going and the family helped out a lot. Then Dave and Dan started pounding doors of investment companies. They would say "Go away. Come back another day. This will never be done. You guys can't do this. This has never been done before." The harder the doors were slammed, the harder we pushed.

So what we started doing was took what at that time I called our show on the road. We didn't have a whole lot. We had some history, we had some brochures. We would go to the finance seminars and we would load everything up into a U-Haul truck. Dave and Dan and I would get into it and drive to Chicago or wherever the show would be, go into the bathroom to get into more fitting attire, do our presentation and meet with the people. Then after everyone was gone, we would tear down, change our clothes, get back into the truck and come home. Then we'd do it all over again. Then we got people who said, "You people just aren't going to go away, I think you've got something there."

What we had to do first was sell our dream because that's all we had been for so many years. Once we sold the dream people understood; that what we said was true. When we started meeting our business plan goals, the money started coming in.

*M.M.M.:* How have you recruited your key people?

*J.H.:* That's an interesting question because we haven't recruited. They come to us. It's just been phenomenal. We pride ourselves on having the best employees in the industry. We know what we had to go after. Dave, Dan and I are not engineers by no means. So we searched for someone who could guide us in our manufacturing and engineering. And Allan Hurd fell into our laps. You know and honestly that's how a lot of our employees have come to us. Yesterday I did a talk at the Chaska Chamber of Commerce and some of the companies there said ""You've been stealing some of

our employees", and I said "Well, you know, we're not stealing your employees, they're coming to us". That says something right there.

*M.M.M.:* Are you the only female co-founder in the history of motorcycling?

*J.H.:* As far as we know. We've been doing some research on that so that we don't state something that isn't true. But yes, as far as we know so far.

*M.M.M.:* What are some of the biggest setbacks you've encountered?

*J.H.:* I never look at anything as a setback. One of the things we firmly believe in here is not to look back because if we would have looked back two or three years ago, we would have stopped. So as far as setbacks, yeah, there have been a few ups and downs but we seem to be able to figure it out and push forward and that's because of the people we have here.

*M.M.M.:* How do you feel that you, as a woman, can bring Excelsior-Henderson to the forefront of the industry?

*J.H.:* Well, I certainly can't do it alone but what I can do is bring a softer side to the industry. Two guys with long hair and black tee shirts they don't listen to a lot of the little things that I think of. So I'm hoping that I can bring a real sense of understanding. I've been riding motorcycles for 18 years so I know all about them and I want to reassure women that they can ride too.

*M.M.M.:* There have been some concerns voiced in the industry about the slow start of production. How would you address that?

*J.H.:* I would address that by saying that Dave and Dan and I are very aggressive people. We don't take no for an answer. Allan Hurd, who is our Senior Vice-President in charge of engineering and manufacturing, has said that what we've done and in the time that we've done it is phenomenal. The little setback that we had was a setback in the media but in our minds, not a setback because we were not going to start the production line until we could produce a motorcycle that we would be proud of.

*M.M.M.:* In what ways were you active in the design process?

*J.H.:* That was fun. They actually used me when they started doing the full mock-ups as a person to sit on the bike to see how it felt ergonomically for a woman. The handlebar position and the distance from the floor to the seat. When they were putting the kickstand on they probably worked for 2-1/2 hours before they could get the kickstand into a position so that I could lift the bike up. So I had a lot to do with it. And I helped select the colors.

*M.M.M.:* Where do you see the industry heading?

*J.H.:* For us, I hope we become a reliable manufacturer. I hope people like our bikes. I hope we can continue to listen to people. I think when these baby boomers grow up, they are going to become cruiser riders. I hope the industry stays big. I hope that we don't get into so many environmental issues that they ruin the sport.

*M.M.M.:* Was there a defining moment when you thought "Wow, this is really going to happen?"

*J.H.:* It was when we gathered everyone here together back on the line and popped the champagne open when the first motorcycle came off the line. They turned the key and it started.

*M.M.M.:* Is there any other information you would like to cover?

*J.H.:* Just that we will be doing public tours of the manufacturing facility so if people want to call here and find out more information on that, they can. And just to ride safe and have fun.

*M.M.M.:* Thank you very much for your time.

*J.H.:* You're welcome, thank you.

### **M.M.M.**

**\*\*Readers!** Call me at 612-750-5988 or e-mail me at [jvcgw@worldnet.att.net](mailto:jvcgw@worldnet.att.net) and share your story and a ride.

Adios,

Crash

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