

Kari Prager

Following a Passion

KARI PRAGER WAS BORN IN THE SUN Valley, Idaho, ski lodge on Oct. 21, 1947. He passed away on Nov. 14, 2010, at his home in Mountain View, Calif., at age 63. Kari's parents, Walter and Eleanor Prager, had come to Sun Valley so Walter could train the U.S. ski team for the 1948 Winter Olympics. Walter had emigrated to the U.S. in 1936 from Switzerland, where he was a national downhill skiing champion. Both before and after the Olympics, Walter coached the ski team at Dartmouth College. During WWII Walter was a U.S. Army sergeant in the 10th Mountain Division and saw combat in the Italian Alps, where he was awarded two Bronze Star Medals and a Purple Heart. Kari's mother, Eleanor, was a sculptor and artist.

Kari grew up in Norwich, Vt., and at age 14 started attending the Putney School in Putney, Vt., where he later became state cross-country skiing champion during his junior and senior high school years. Kari's passion for skiing and guns came from his father, and his mother's artistic passions explains Kari's strong interest in reading, music and a cultural curiosity.



In 1970, Gail and Kari Prager set out on a four-month motorcycle adventure on a BMW R60/2. (Photo courtesy of Gail Prager)



Gail and Kari Prager at CalMoto in 1986. (Photo courtesy of Gail Prager)

So how did a kid with a scholarship to Dartmouth College (1965–69), who graduated with honors, with degrees in anthropology and graphic arts, become an enthusiastic motorcycle guy? Probably when Kari bought a BMW motorcycle while attending Dartmouth. But wait, after Dartmouth Kari got a Harvard fellowship and, after only one semester, realized it wasn't right for him. Kari was poised to follow his passions, but what were his passions? Here's how Kari slowly but surely got it together.

When Kari attended Putney School as a young teenager, he spent part of a summer vacation at one of his roommates' parent's place, where the main attraction was a sailboat on a lake. That roommate had a younger sister, named Gail, who was then 10 years old. Flash forward a few years, Kari is 19 and Gail is 16, and Kari had come to visit his old Putney roommate, riding there on his BMW motorcycle. Kari took Gail for a ride, though her older brother was keeping a close watch! By then Gail was attending Putney School, though Kari had already graduated and moved on. Kari and Gail stayed in touch, and as Kari noted, Gail kept getting prettier and prettier.

After Kari dropped out of Harvard, he returned to Vermont and stayed at a former professor's place. Living not far away was an old Putney flame. He went over to visit her, but she already had a steady. As luck would have it, Gail was also there. She had just dropped out of Chicago University after her freshman year! They decided to go for a walk to a waterfall and compare dropout notes. Suddenly, a big snowball fight happened, and it wasn't long before it was Kari and Gail against all the rest. An hour later they were falling in love. The romance had begun.

It wasn't long before Gail moved in with Kari and a few months later (1970) they embarked on a four-month motorcycle adventure, riding all around the U.S., camping out, cozy on Kari's BMW R60/2, customized to look like a café racer. A while later Kari and Gail sort of broke up, but stayed in touch, while Kari moved to Europe for six months on an archaeological dig and Gail moved to California to finish college. Their love slowly rekindled. Kari followed Gail to California and they were back together again, though Kari was still seeking his career muse. Gail got her bachelor's degree and went on to get an MFA.



Kari Prager riding his R80GS "Trusty" at RawHyde Adventures in 2007. This first-in-the-U.S. BMW, which he rode on many road, adventure and dual-sport trips, was given to Kari by BMW Motorrad for "test and evaluation purposes." (Photo courtesy of RawHyde Adventures)



Kari Prager's R80GS "Trusty" displayed at RawHyde Adventures. (Photo courtesy of RawHyde Adventures)

By 1978, Gail and Kari each had their own BMW motorcycles, both fixed up and maintained by Kari, an R75/7 for Kari, and a (restored) R69S for Gail. They rode them to Massachusetts, where they married, then back to California. In the early 1980s their two daughters arrived.

Kari's experience with restoring, modifying, fixing and maintaining BMWs landed him a job as a motorcycle mechanic at a Northern California BMW dealer. Kari next (1977-81) opened an independent motorcycle repair shop in San Francisco, Bavarian Cycle Works, with three partners. In 1981 he became one of the founding partners of a BMW motorcycle dealership,

California BMW, now CalMoto Mountain View. Michael Meissner, now owner/general manager, joined in 2000. Kari lived to see the opening of their second dealership in Livermore, Calif., Tri-Valley Moto, in August 2008, which was just renamed CalMoto Livermore.

Like anyone, Kari had other passions outside of work. Even though I met Kari shortly after he opened CalMoto in Mountain View, I never knew he was also a poet until one of his poems was read at a memorial at one of his favorite Pacific Ocean overlooks. A video of that can be seen in the MOA website video section (www.youtube.com/watch?v=cV9WDiesV-U). ☺

I Rode With My Buddies Today

By Kari Prager

*I rode with my buddies today.
We rode in a line of headlights and tailpipes,
not going anywhere special, not even going fast,
just meandering like a herd of elk
to move through the forest at our own pace.
Our sound precedes us, not loud
but unmistakable, the power of
this most romantic way of moving.
The pleasure is in the going, the mobility,
the little acts of control that contrive
to keep us centered on the road.
The crackle of dead leaves,
the burnt bitterness of autumn,
the smell of the moon still shining in the blue of the sky,
magical in the motion of the moment.
I feel my friends flowing around the bends, the line of bikes without
conscious order, in symmetrical array, till we signal the end,
stopping and turning back into individuals, the magic
fading as the motors are stilled, the jackets come off, and we breathe
in the mundane and profane air of the stationary world.*

Kari Prager at sunset. (Photo courtesy of Gail Prager)