

Biker on global trek finds kindred spirit in Brockton

By Neal Thompson
ENTERPRISE STAFF WRITER

BROCKTON — When Bernarda "Benka" Pulko of Slovenia pulled into Dee Gagnon's driveway on Howard Street last week, she found a kindred spirit in the president of the South Shore chapter of the Women on Wheels motorcycle club.

"The first time I called her, we talked on the phone for an hour," said Pulko, a 30-year-old Slovene journalist making a solo around-the-world motorcycle trek.

Gagnon's experience traveling the United States on her own motorcycle two years ago made for an immediate bond.

"I told her if she came through the Boston area, to call me because I know what it's like on the road," Gagnon said. "I've got a good understanding of what she's doing."

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Pulko said Gagnon's letter is one of the few possessions she carries with her.

In 1995 Gagnon took off on a solo 17,381-mile motorcycle trip to see America.

"I had a back pack and a tent and went off to see the country," she said at the time.

Last year, Gagnon, 37, participated in the Pony Express Tour '96 National Ride for Breast Cancer Research in which mo-



KEVIN J. FACHETTI/THE ENTERPRISE

Bernarda Pulko of Slovenia, front, and Dee Gagnon of Brockton have both traveled long distances alone on their motorcycles.

torcyclists rode through the 48 continental states to raise money for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

Meeting Pulko was a chance for Gagnon to relive some of

those experiences.

"We are both free spirits," said Gagnon, who works as a physical fitness instructor at the Brockton YMCA.

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A native of Ljubljana, Slovenia's largest city, Pulko said she fell into journalism after working as a biology professor at the university there.

At the time, she also was also working as a physiologist and chiropractor for Slovenia's national basketball team.

Now, she is touring the United States, writing about the places she visits and people she meets for 18 radio stations and eight newspapers and magazines in Slovenia.

She also has a home page on the Internet so the people she meets along the way and friends and family at home in Slovenia can follow her progress.

On Friday many of the Women on Wheels club's 40 members showed up for a back yard barbecue at Gagnon's home to meet Pulko and, just as importantly, to check out her bike.

The BMW F650 she has been riding around the world was donated by BMW-Tehnounion Auto in Slovenia.

Pulko modified it herself, adding a larger gas tank and extra storage cases to carry her mini-laptop computer, tent and scant personal effects.

For Pulko, her discovery of the local motorcycle club was something of a shock, Gagnon said.

In Pulko's native country, which was part of the former Yugoslavia, women motorcyclists are still something of a novelty.

"We have about 2,000 members nationwide," said Gagnon of the Women on Wheels organization. "We are pretty spread out

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geographically. We're dedicated to improving the image of motorcyclists."

The South Shore Chapter of Women on Wheels meets monthly to discuss such things as how to change your own oil, but there are excursions to "go to get ice cream or go shopping or go to Hull for seafood," Gagnon said.

"We are a family-oriented organization," she said.

When Pulko leaves Massachusetts next week, she will be heading north, through Maine and into Canada.

Later, she said she hopes to hit most of the southern states, including Florida, before flying to South America.

Pulko said when she reaches Venezuela, she is going to take a side trip, without her motorcycle, to Antarctica.

She will also visit New Zealand, Australia, Tasmania and Indonesia. She is hoping to visit China, but is currently having some visa problems with that country. Lastly, she will be riding her motorcycle through most of Africa, returning to Europe in about two years.

When she completes her journey, she said, there is a possibility she will be included among the "extremists" in the Guinness Book of Records.

"But first, I have to have my little adventure," she said.