

# SINGLE TRACK SPARKPLUGS: PEOPLE WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

## *Kari Prager – a motorcycle renaissance man*

By Erik Munck, OTL SoCal Correspondent

With a double major in Graphic arts, Anthropology and a full scholarship to Harvard, Kari Prager was on a fast track to a life in academia. Then fate in the shape of BMW motorcycles intervened. Long story short, Kari and his wife Gail became co-founders of CALIFORNIA BMW in Mountain View, California, and were sparkplugs for BMW at a crucial time in the US, and helped launch the official BMW Offroad Academy owned by Jim Hyde.



Gail and Kari Prager, 1986

Kari had become a well-respected member of the BMW dealer council, and as a result, BMW Motorrad shipped a pre-production prototype R80G/S, one of the first on this Continent, to Kari for evaluation, testing and feedback purposes. Quite an honor. A Certificate of Origin was never issued, so the bike couldn't be registered. But Kari dispensed with that issue. He stuck a dealer plate on the bike and went riding. Nicknamed 'Trusty', that 33 year old bike now resides with Jim Hyde, a gift from the Prager family, displayed with the rest of RawHyde's significant machinery collection.



Kari's historic R80G/S, at RawHyde.

Jim Hyde of RawHyde Adventures: "Kari made RawHyde one of his many projects and became a tireless promoter for what we do. Before we became the official BMW off-road academy, Kari talked to BMW behind the scenes on our behalf and did

everything he could do to promote our programs and events to BMW NA.

Kari was the best friend I had in the BMW dealer world, and he taught me the inner workings of BMW and the culture of the dealerships. I first met Kari at a dealer event in 2004, where I was promoting RawHyde. My idea was to position RawHyde as the definition of upscale adventure provider: Dirt by day, Luxury by Night. And Kari got it. He understood what I was trying to accomplish; a direct connection between RawHyde and the BMW dealer network would be mutually beneficial.”

The typical GS owner would buy the bike, but then what? Jim recalls the early RawHyde days: “As events progressed, I realized that most new GS owners had no concept of riding in the dirt. We were drawing lots of riders to our tours, and quite a few struggled terribly. A training program was needed, and Kari became the cheerleader for RawHyde within BMW. He recognized that we would turn the BMW GS owners into advocates for the sport and the lifestyle. They would buy more bikes and bring friends for more adventures to be recounted around the campfires. Great for everyone involved.”

Kari’s connections in the BMW world stretched far and wide. Former BMW VP for North America, Pieter de Waal, first met Kari in 1998: “My personal relationship with Kari goes back to the introduction of the R1200C in Tucson. At the time I was head of BMW Motorrad in South Africa. Klaus Becker, then head of worldwide BMW Motorrad sales, told me that it was an absolute must to tour the west coast of California on a BMW. Kari was the contact for a loaner bike on such short notice. He didn’t know me from a bar of soap, yet when I flew from Tucson to San Francisco, Kari was there waiting for me with a K1200LT. I had a wonderful time touring the wine country, and the Coastal Highway from Carmel to Los Angeles. Little did I know that I would also make a great friend!”

In South Africa, de Waal had established the BMW Lifestyle Centers, which focused on what you can do with your BMW, selling the lifestyle, rather than just focusing on the features of the machines. It was a huge success. My next position was head of BMW Motorrad UK. Kari sent me a note congratulating me. Kari had that ‘old school’ love for BMWs, he understood the lifestyle, and a rider’s desire to be part of a unique adventure. Eventually I ended up in Germany as head of BMW Motorrad worldwide sales. Again, there was a note from Kari.

We kept in touch over the years, and in 2008 I was appointed

head of BMW Motorrad USA. Prior, I had traveled to San Diego to be the guest speaker at the annual BMW dealer meeting. Quite frankly speaking, there was then a lot of friction between the dealer body and BMW headquarters in the US. Kari and I had an informal talk about these issues and he was instrumental in smoothing the road after my transition. He was a great sounding board, loyal to the brand, and gave me much-needed feedback from the dealer’s perspective. When Kari introduced Jim Hyde to me, we spoke the same language. It took me less than 10 minutes to make the go-ahead decision. The RawHyde BMW Off Road Academy became reality.”



R1200 & R80G/S

*New meets old. Kari’s legacy lives on at Rawhyde.*

“Adventure riding is really in my heart. I have ridden the Continental Divide ride twice. It’s been a life-changing experience for me. Events like that have to be run by people who love the lifestyle, love the bikes, and love the people involved. That’s what Kari was all about.”

Kari’s father, Walter, was born in Switzerland, and became a championship downhill skier. He emigrated to the US in 1936, where he became the skiing coach at Dartmouth College, NH. When the war broke out, Walter Prager went to Fort Hale, CO, where he was trained in winter warfare, then fought in the Italian Alps with the 10<sup>th</sup> US Army Mountain Division.

It was in Colorado that Walter met New Jersey girl Eleanor. They married, and Kari arrived in 1947. Walter was one of the ski coaches for the 1948 US Olympic team, which explains why Kari was born at the Sun Valley, Idaho Ski-Lodge. Kari once

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spent a summer in Switzerland working in his family's hotel, where he earned enough money to buy his first motorcycle, a BMW single, which he rode all over Europe, finally ending up in England.

Next, Harvard came calling with a full scholarship in art history, by the end of his first semester, Kari realized that academia was not for him. Soon Kari decided that a career in motorcycles was what he wanted. By that time, Kari and Gail, his partner since 1970 and future wife, had moved to Berkeley, CA and found work at once-thriving BMW of Marin, Gail in parts and Kari as a factory trained technician.

In 1977 two customers approached Kari with the idea of opening an independent BMW repair shop in San Francisco, Bavarian Cycle Works. Seemed like a plan. But first, wedding bells rang in 1978, in MA. The cross-country travel was naturally via BMW motorcycles; Kari on his R75 and Gail on her R69S. Kari finished the complete restoration of Gail's machine the evening before departure. The ride and continuing adventures of Gail and Kari continued on happily. Then in 1980 Kari and Gail and their partners became BMW dealers.

Gail recalls: "Crossing over into the fold of certified BMW

dealers was not an easy process. As an independent shop, we were not looked upon favorably by corporate BMW, yet Kari was so well liked and highly respected that we were able to pull it off. His people skills enabled him to make many friends within BMW Motorrad of North America. Kari's attitude and ways were genuine, he loved connecting, and sharing with people."

That same year Gail gave birth to daughter Maya, and little sister Kristin would join the Prager family in 1983. Third generation Graden Nolan is now a year old. By 1981, California BMW was a bustling reality, growing in size and reputation.

Partner Mike Meissner met Kari in 1981: "My dad owned the building where Gail, Kari and their partners had opened up California BMW. I was 19 years old, in college, and worked part time as an auto mechanic for my dad. So Kari and I worked in the same building, and a recurring theme was our common interest in all things mechanical. It would be fair to say that his ability to tune those air-head twins by ear was nothing short of amazing."

In short order, Mike was hooked on BMWs too. Despite his mother's protests, a K75S became a new addition to the Meissner garage.



Eating dust, courtesy of Kari and Trusty.

Fast forward to 1999; Mike bought his dad's automotive repair shop. Sometimes things weren't all that great. Taking notice, Kari asked what was wrong. Mike ranted and vented for a while, then Kari said: "If you ever get too frustrated, come work with me". Mike realized Kari had something serious up his sleeve, so in 2000 the Meissners and Pragers became business partners.

Kari really introduced Mike to the world of serious riding. "A group of us would meet up regularly at Alice's Restaurant, a storied destination in the mountains just south of San Francisco. On a good day I could hang with him. But after the November rains, Page Mill Road could be nasty - tight, cold, wet, bumpy, with wet leaves - none of which did anything to slow Kari down. 'There's always more traction than you think' he would say. That was a life lesson he taught me, that and the way he did things. Take calculated risks and be smart at it. Ride fast and take chances."

"Kari's guidance came from the way he operated and how he

approached people. Extremely passionate, he bubbled with enthusiasm, and yet he moved from task to task with incredible smoothness and a Zen grace. He probably learned by observing his world-class athlete father. He never went into a project unprepared."

Gail: "If it hadn't been for bikes, it might have been graphic arts, writing poetry, printing books, or gunsmithing. He was very inventive and resourceful, and he would even machine parts for guns. He loved archeology and anthropology, but didn't want to be a professor. He was a doer. He loved riding in the worst possible weather, he liked challenges, he loved pushing the envelope. Mountain peaks had a great attraction for him; if it was climbable, Kari was there. He loved Bach, especially the organ music he played so often and so loud!" Gail laughs at the memory: "I finally had to ask him to wear headphones!"

Jim Hyde recalls things that go boom: "Kari liked guns, Swiss guns in particular. I had an old Swiss army rifle. I brought it



Water crossing

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along as a special treat to show Kari. His eyes popped wide when he saw it. Later he confided that day was a pivotal moment in our friendship.”

Mike Meissner: “Kari made instant friends, he was a very generous, gracious person. Being business partners with the Pragers was a good fit for all of us. They were the face of the dealership, I was very comfortable being operations manager. There has to be personality attached to a dealership like this one. It was hard for me to realize that with Kari gone, I had to change myself to carry on the legacy; turning to connecting with customers, keep the goals, feel and culture of the shop alive. Our company motto, ‘*Experience Shared*’, isn’t just a saying. It’s the guiding light as to how we do business.

It struck a chord with all of us that our approach to selling motorcycles should be a direct reflection of Kari, so we work hard to make this a welcoming place to explore our sport. He was a free spirit who waltzed through life. The common thread, the core to his being, is that he truly understood how other people felt.”

Kari passed away in late 2010. A surprising array of medical problems occurred after a violent high-side, leaving him with a broken wrist and foot. A respiratory illness followed, which later masked a fatal pneumonic infection.

Jim Hyde: “While he was sick, Kari wrote long letters to those who were close to him, fulfilling the parts of his life that were most important to him: the personal relationships. Kari was my friend. He was the single most influential person inside the industry to get us off the ground and to where we are today.”

Gail: “We were in the middle of selling the business to our partners Anya and Michael Meissner. We were getting ready to enjoy retirement, and there were so many things we were going to do. He loved his work, he was a renaissance man, a true

adventurer, an instigator, a lover of life and people. He did what he wanted to do. He was a lucky guy, but gone way too soon. He was a mentor to everyone who knew him.” 🇩🇪



Kari playing in the mud