

RIDING FREE WITH WILLIE G

BY DAVID FABRY

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Growing up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, during the 1970s was challenging, for many reasons. For one thing, prior to audiology, my main focus was on music, football, and motorcycles, and things had taken a turn for the worse. Rock and roll gave way to disco, Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers had been dismantled, and Milwaukee's Harley-Davidson (H-D) motorcycle company had fallen on hard times. The ultimate insult, from my perspective, occurred in 1969 when H-D had been purchased by American Machine and Foundry (AMF), a company more famous for headpins than Panheads. At the time, AMF had become one of the largest bowling companies in the world, and in an attempt to further diversify its business, entered into the boat, water ski, and motorcycle markets. The merger proved disastrous for H-D; in the quest to become the largest manufacturer of motorcycles in the world, AMF H-D produced models that had quality problems.

Enter Vaughn Beals and Willie G. Davidson, grandson to one of the founding members of Harley-Davidson in 1903. In 1981, the two men led a group of 13 investors to buy back the company from AMF, and the rest is the stuff of legend. By the time that Brett Favre and the Green Bay Packers returned to glory as Super Bowl champions in 1997, Harley-Davidson had once again regained control of the heavyweight

(over 750 cc) motorcycle market, and waiting lists of up to a year were not uncommon for popular models. Although many factors contributed to the success, "Willie G." is the iconic figure responsible for rekindling much of the Harley "mystique;" as senior vice president and chief styling officer, he was responsible for shaking up the company with new and innovative ideas that established H-D as the ultimate in "cool." *Audiology Today* had the opportunity to kick back with Willie G. recently to discuss a variety of topics ranging from horsepower to hearing aids.

AT: Thanks for sitting down to talk with me today. I know that you have had a very busy summer, with the Harley-Davidson Museum opening in July and the 105th Anniversary Celebration at the end of August.

WG: Yes, and Sturgis is going on as we speak, so it has been a busy few months, but it always seems that way, but I am glad that you are here!

AT: Me too. I love being back in Wisconsin, and it is great to see you. We originally met in 2001, when I was president of the American Academy of Audiology, and I saw a picture of you wearing in-the-ear hearing aids in the Harley-Davidson *Annual Report*. I wrote you a letter stating how impressed I was that you would serve as such a positive role model for hearing loss and hearing aids, and was surprised to receive a phone call from you a week later. Do you remember what we talked about?

WG: (*laughing*) Yes, I said that I hadn't had the best of luck with either audiologists or hearing aids.

AT: One heck of a way to start a relationship! This statement provided motivation to me for several years, because it typifies some of the problems with our industry and profession, but more about that later. How long have you known that you have hearing loss?

WG: Boy, I guess I would have to shoot in the dark, but it has probably been 25 years since I first discovered I had hearing difficulty.

AT: You first got hearing aids 25 years ago?

WG: No, I gradually discovered this was going on. Because you are not ready for hearing aids and you're not really sure if you have a hearing problem because it creeps up on you.

AT: It has often been said that approximately seven years pass from the time a person suspects that they have hearing loss until they actually purchase hearing aids.

WG: And then you have to get used to them. You really don't want the inconvenience of going through the procedure of putting them in and taking them out.



William G. Davidson, grandson of William A. Davidson, a founder of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, is shown after winning a 1952 endurance race.

AT: Which style did you wear first?

WG: Well, I have had them in glasses, then in-the-ear, and now behind-the-ear.

AT: Which do you like best?

WG: These behind-the-ear ones are the most efficient ones that I have had, and they blend in pretty well.

AT: So, you have had hearing aids for 25 years—if you don't mind me asking, how old are you now?

WG: I am 75 now, and my wife Nancy and I both have great reviews from our doctors, except that I have Type II diabetes.

AT: There have been several studies that link diabetes to hearing loss, and it is not terribly surprising, given that microvascular disease might affect the blood supply to the inner ear. The challenge is that we have to get the word out, so internists start screening the hearing of people with diabetes.

You mention that these hearing aids “blend in” pretty well. Was there ever a time that you were reticent to wear your hearing aids in public?

WG: I think that you have thoughts. I am a visual person—a designer and artist. Visual people are maybe more aware of how they may look or not look. I have always had longish hair; I looked like a mountain man. That was something that helped me, because they were kind of buried. Beyond the appearance, however, you kind of go through a series of phases, to where you get over the inconvenience of putting them in. Eventually, you realize that you *need* them and now I would advise anyone who is even slightly hard of hearing or who has a problem to get hearing aids and use them. And try to get over that awkward period. They can be hard to get used to, but they really help.

AT: What's the hardest part?

WG: Sometimes the earmolds don't fit quite right and they hurt your ears. Plus, I wish they were like glasses, because they are amazing and they lock in your vision and you see perfectly. Or cataract surgery—I've been through it with both eyes.

AT: You are correct; for the majority of people who have vision problems, glasses, contacts, or surgery can be used to correct—more or less—to normal function because they have a normal sensory system. Unfortunately, almost 95% of hearing losses cannot be corrected to “20/20” hearing, because they have suffered damage to their sensory system. If you know someone who has glaucoma or macular degeneration, they probably don't experience “crystal clear” vision—even with appropriate treatment. On that topic, what do you think about the “Helen Keller” question? That is, she indicated that, for her, the problems of deafness were a much worse misfortune than blindness, because, in her words, “Blindness separates us from things but deafness separates us from people.”

WG: Well that might be different for me. Communication with me *can* be visual, it can be silent. It can be developing a painting, developing graphics, working on shapes or forms, and going through the process of a “mock-up” design critique. I am not saying that you could do it as well as if you used sign language, but you could probably communicate with sketches if you have a group of artists who were there with you. That's how we “talk” all the time. Our walls are just filled with drawings;

we talk about “filling wastebaskets” all the time. When we do concepts, we have to iterate, because that is how you get to the

AT: Right on! I am sure that you have noticed that the marketing materials have reflected the change to the

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nicest design. You have to go through hundreds of styles to get to the final product, and it is very visual.

AT: A very interesting perspective and not surprising since your products evoke such a powerful visual message. Also, given your acute focus on aesthetics, did anyone ever try to talk you out of wearing hearing aids for public appearances?

WG: No. I don't ever feel awkward about them.

AT: I would love to say that everyone feels that way; I have the privilege to work with patients who were in the public eye, and some haven't been as comfortable.

WG: With the improvements that have been developed in recent years, I think it would be crazy to not have patients that would want to try hearing aids.

baby boomer generation, who are just starting to fall within the “target age” for hearing loss caused by age-related factors.

WG: The curve has to be working in your favor because of the number of “boomers” that are playing into your market that must realize that they need to talk to their kids, their spouses, and/or their buddies. And they've got to be able to do it.

AT: You certainly know that consumer, and there is some demographic overlap between the hearing aid and motorcycle marketplace. I remember seeing some statistic that said the oldest baby boomers are turning 60 at the rate of over 300 per hour, so this certainly is a strong demographic shift. Furthermore, they view retirement very differently as a group than their parents. My dad worked for the same company his whole life, and viewed retirement as a “finish line.” Do you think about retirement?



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WG: The “R” word (retirement) has never been my great desire. A lot of people count the hours until they can pull the plug. To me, it would be a reverse situation—it would kind of be going from something really exciting to maybe too much free time.

AT: What do you do with your free time now?

WG: We have a log cabin up North and I am building a studio next to it—we call it our tree house, which gives you a super view. I am designing it, but I don’t have the time to physically do it. It will be built out of all hand-hewn logs and a lot of neat wood. It’s far enough away, but also close enough to the amenities, in case we need them.

AT: Would you ever consider living there full time?

WG: I think that I would be bored. This is an exciting business to be in. They also are saying that you should remain active. In addition to work, I have a lot of hobbies—my bikes, my paintings. I have got some nice four-wheelers and all kinds of stuff and projects. The room next to us right now is full of motorcycles; although I can’t show them to you, it is very energizing work. As long as my health is okay, and now that I can hear, I’m set to go.

AT: That passion really seems to fuel everything that you do. Is that the key to your role as a driving force behind Harley-Davidson’s great turnaround from the low point in the early 1980s?

WG: Well, AMF was a very diversified company, and they had developed a huge product portfolio, including a lot of recreational equipment, and it turns out in the end that they didn’t really understand what this business is all about—how capital intensive it is, and most importantly, they didn’t understand the customer.

AT: We’ve seen that in our industry as well, particularly with hearing aids. There have been some very large companies that tried to commoditize hearing aids, when really a lot of the business is relationship-driven. The one thing that I have seen that you do is that you stay in touch with the riders. I have seen you at Sturgis, Daytona, the H-D Anniversary rides, etc. Is this the best way to anticipate market trends and try out new ideas?

WG: We are out there to be students of the culture, and “one-on-one” is probably the most direct kind of survey anybody could do. When you talk to users, and you are standing next to their passion, you see that their motorcycle is an important part of their social activity. We try to be simple—mix form and function.

AT: I have often said that I wished hearing aids were as cool as motorcycles, because then everyone would want them. If you had one bit of advice for audiologists and the hearing aid industry, based on H-D’s success story, what would it be?

WG: Very good question—I guess somehow you have to get into the psychology of people—but you have to somehow get them past the negative stage and sell them on how their lives will be changed by your products and services, you know?

AT: Please elaborate!

WG: I have a lot of riders that come up to me and it's really the happiest part of my existence. They say, your company has changed my life and they say it with a smile, so it is on the "positive side" of the meter. And then they will introduce me to their significant other whom they have met through one of our gatherings, or sometimes they'll point to the whole group of riders that they came to this event with, and they are having fun as a result of a product. I think that's really cool. If you could convince people somehow to get past this "no man's land" where they're fighting through wearing hearing aids and they are worried about the visuals or complexity, then I am sure that this is a major part of what you are doing every day. We live in a high-tech world. Some of it I embrace and some of it I don't, because some of it complicates your life. I think that the user interface is huge; you see some people's eyes glaze over with technology, and yet if you can demonstrate the functionality that will change your life and make it more fun, all the better.

AT: There are several studies that show the impact of untreated hearing loss; indeed the challenge is to translate that into a positive message for the way that hearing *connects* us with others, like friends and family.

WG: Yes, and for many my age that could be through their grandchildren—the second realization of how great life is. We have one grandchild right now; she is nine and is just starting to ride dirt bikes. She is not really into iron horses, but petting horses. It is a special bond.

AT: Any kind of horsepower works, I guess. Please make sure that she wears hearing protection when she rides that dirt bike!

WG: I didn't realize that your ears don't have protection; you know, like your eyes have eyelids. I have spent a lot of time around race tracks and high-performance engines. One time I was at a race track and got nailed right behind a set of exhaust systems that were being tested and I didn't hear anything for the next day—hearing totally gone. I'm sure noise has factored into my hearing loss, and my hearing showed up damaged when I had my first test some years ago.

AT: Well, your ears do have a protective mechanism that worked reasonably well until the industrial revolution. Certain loud sounds can cause irreparable damage after only one exposure. I guess the visual analogy is that you can't stare into a welder's arc or the sun, but you are right—we don't have "earlids" and that is where earplugs come into play.



Willie G. Davidson at the Harley Davidson Open Road Tour in Atlanta, Georgia, July 2002, at the Atlanta Motor Speedway.

WG: I'm getting to earplugs because I now know that what I have left I've got to protect—I've got to save that, and I can't very easily give up being around noise. We sponsor a team of very high-performance dragsters, and we go to the National Hot Rod Association events. There are lots of big fuel cars and motorcycles that have enormous horsepower—they shake the ground. I love them—they are so neat, but you have to really be careful, because when they light them off, they just explode! It is so cool, but you can actually feel the sound in your chest. We wear earplugs and these big orange muffs, and you see people walking around with nothing on their ears. This is a situation where you are proud to wear hearing protection because you are a supporter of this fantastic engine, but you are protecting what you are born with. I would simply say to use your brainpower if you think that you are going to be around loud sounds. With kids, however, it is a different situation—they are not going to listen.

AT: And the problem is that the damage occurs before you realize it. It is simply amazing to me the number of young kids I am seeing these days with noise-induced hearing loss. I blame a lot of it on MP3 players, because you can listen all day at levels that would not be “socially approvable” if they were played through a loudspeaker. I tell parents that if they can identify the song that their child is listening to on their personal music player, it is way too loud.

WG: We used to say, “If it’s too loud, you’re too old.” And now I say, “If it is too loud, wear ear plugs, and if I’m too old, to hell with them.”

AT: Youth is wasted on the young! Okay, back to the Harley-Davidson story. First off, who was Harley?

WG: Well, Harley was friends with the original three Davidson brothers, and they were always tinkering around with bikes and engines in late high school and college. The Davidsons have remained closer to the motorcycle business; we were imprinted early and fell in love with the whole thing and here we are.

AT: Do you have a favorite bike?

WG: Well, I’m asked that question all the time. I am a collector, and I have some very interesting bikes in my collection. There were eras of this company that were fascinating to me—one is board track racing on high banked boards in the 1920s. That was just a short-lived period of time; these guys would ride around in these wooden “bowls.” Those bikes, they just made a handful of them and I’m lucky to have one, and we have a few in our museum. That just fascinates me; we’ll never see that era again. They were lapping these tracks at in excess 100 miles per hour on these little spindly bicycle rims. The tracks were not good for being weather resistant, and were impossible to maintain. Oh man, it was an amazing time period.

AT: You mentioned the museum—tell us a little about it.

WG: The Harley-Davidson Museum opened July 12 in Milwaukee, and it celebrates the people, products, culture, and history that have made the company what it is today. It means so much to me and my family that we wanted to leave something permanent as a gift. We chose to commission a bronze sculpture of a hill climber as a subject because it portrays the thrill and adventure of the sport and because of the important role motorcycle competition played in developing enthusiast culture.

AT: Okay, as a fellow biker, I have to ask—do you have a favorite place to ride?

WG: Wisconsin. Think of this state—in the East you’ve got Lake Michigan and Door County, which to me is like New England. And if you keep going North, and have Mackinac Island to the East, and Lake Superior and Duluth to the West. Head South and you pick up the Mississippi River, which you can follow all the way down to the Illinois border. I think that it is hard to beat the farmland of this place; these fertile farmlands, with the little red barns and big red barns dotting the landscape. Now a lot of people say Colorado, and I like Utah a lot, because of the colors—the reds, pinks, and purples; I think that those are phenomenal. But it’s hard to beat just the tranquil views in this state of water and farms.

AT: Yes, I agree. The Mississippi River Bluffs region around La Crosse is my personal favorite, and there are some great roads on both the Wisconsin and Minnesota side of the river. The area around Bayfield and Madeline Island is pretty spectacular, too. What about your best international ride?

WG: Well, we did a neat ride from London across the channel to Paris, continuing to the south of France and on to the Mediterranean, including Nice. There are so many great places to ride over there. We rode in Hong Kong; they’ve got “Lambos” and Harleys, but there is no place to really drive them fast.

AT: Okay, now for the real question—when we first met, you said that your experience with hearing aids and audiologists was pretty bad. I hope that has changed over the years.

WG: My opinions have changed greatly because of you. The technology has been a tremendous help to me. I can’t operate very well without them. I am very grateful for the help that you gave and that companies are doing research to help me.

AT: Whew, mission accomplished. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us, and I hope to see you out on the road. **AT**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID FABRY, PhD, is content editor of *Audiology Today* and the chief of audiology at the University of Miami, in Miami, FL.