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‘BLESSING OF THE BIKES’ SPOTLIGHTS MOTORCYCLE SAFETY

Uniontown, PA – Dozens of motorcycles lined Main Street in Uniontown Saturday, as riders gathered to have their bikes blessed for the upcoming riding season.

The Fayette County Commissioners and the Fayette County Chapter of the Alliance of Bikers Aimed Toward Education (A.B.A.T.E.) hosted the event as part of Motorcycle Safety Awareness Month.

A.B.A.T.E. Chapter Coordinator Robert Woodke said May is an important month for bikers, as many are just kicking off their rides for the warmer months.

“Nice spring days will bring out the motorcyclist to take in the fresh air and enjoy the thrill of riding again. It is true that some of us ride year-round, anytime the road conditions are safe enough for our riding skill level,” Woodke said. “That being said, it’s important for other drivers to be aware that motorcycles will be mixed in with traffic at a much higher rate than the off-season months.”

Saturday’s riders received a Uniontown City Police escort from the nearby American Legion Post 51 to the Fayette County Courthouse steps, where local, state and federal legislators and Pastor Asa Walters were waiting. Walters blessed the bikes as a ceremonial gesture, giving the motorcyclists an extra sense of safety and security as they resumed their ride.

Woodke said A.B.A.T.E. strives to raise awareness all year round by working closely with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) to distribute yellow “Watch for Motorcycles” yard signs and stickers, children’s activity books and other educational materials free of charge to all who request them.

A.B.A.T.E. also offers skill-riding classes to new and experienced bikers through the Pennsylvania Motorcycle Safety Program. The program is free in Pennsylvania, as it’s funded through PennDOT’s motorcycle registration fees. Many instructors are A.B.A.T.E. members, Woodke added.

The Fayette County Chapter also oversees the Operation Save A Life program, a motorcycle safety awareness presentation designed for teenagers in local schools and adaptable for any organization who would like to host it. Additionally, Woodke said the group regularly hosts organized fundraising rides for various charities.

“If you see a group of motorcycles riding together, please pay them the respect you would a funeral procession. A large group of riders is almost always raising funds for charity and committed their own

time and money into joining that event,” Woodke said. “Do not try to break inline between them or merge into the group from a ramp. A little patience on everyone’s behalf will go a long way.”

Woodke said knowledge of motorcycle safety laws is important for all citizens, because motorcycles “operate differently than cars do.”

“They can require longer distance to stop and may change lane position while riding to avoid potholes, gravel, grass clippings and any other debris on the road that isn’t an immediate hazard to a car,” he said. “Taillights, stoplights, and turn signals are smaller on motorcycles, as well, and may be difficult for a driver to see.”

Woodke offered additional points for motorists to remember when sharing the road with motorcycles this season:

- “When driving near motorcycles, stay alert and offer them more distance in front of and behind the motorcycle.
- Look both directions before pulling out from a stop or while turning, as motorcycles are smaller and harder to see.
- Vehicles failing to see an approaching motorcycle when turning left and rear-ending a motorcycle are the leading causes of motorcycle deaths.
- Distracted driving is becoming a great threat to motorcycle safety. Please stay off cell phones and be aware.”

A.B.A.T.E. accepted several certificates of recognition for their efforts Saturday, and previously accepted a Motorcycle Safety Awareness Month proclamation from the county commissioners.

Commissioner Chairman Scott Dunn said motorcycle safety “isn’t just about protecting oneself.”

“It’s about fostering a culture of responsibility and respect from all drivers to ensure the well-being of all road users. Non-cyclists need to remove distractions, including cell phones, and recognize that motorcycles are harder to see,” Dunn said. “Motorcycles are smaller and narrower than cars, trucks and other vehicles, making them easier to overlook, especially in a driver’s blind spot. As Fayette County invites all travelers into our scenic countryside, we want our visitors to enjoy a safe, accident-free stay.”

Commissioner Vince Vicites said Motorcycle Safety Awareness Month is important to observe, because “It can help save lives.”

“As commissioners, it’s our duty to help foster awareness of various causes, but especially ones as important as this,” Vicites said. “A.B.A.T.E. has made a difference over the years with their own promotional efforts, and we thank them for being so concerned about and caring for our community.”

Commissioner Dave Lohr, who “grew up in a family of motorcycle enthusiasts,” and has been riding since age eight, said he is “acutely aware of the inherent dangers and pitfalls of riding a motorcycle.”

“I now have three (motorcycles), and other family members have another six, so you can say that this subject is extremely important to me. Education is our single best defense when it comes to safety because, without knowing what you can do to better protect yourself and others, you may be putting

yourself at greater risk. By God's hand of grace, I have never had a motorcycle accident, but I've had my fair share of close calls, and my prayers go out to everyone affected by a motorcycle accident," Lohr said. "Groups like A.B.A.T.E. do a fantastic job of getting the word out, increasing awareness and putting safety concerns on the radar of riders and motorists alike. We all share the same road; let's make sure we're doing it safely."

To learn more about Fayette County Chapter 25 of the Alliance of Bikers Aimed Toward Education, visit www.abatepa.org/fayette or email robert.woodke@abatepa.org.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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For more information, contact Kristi Kassimer Harper, Public Relations Specialist, at 724-437-4571, kkassimer@fayettecountypa.info or Kaylie Glaze, Community Relations Coordinator, at 724-430-1200 Ext. 1611, kmoore@fayettepa.org.