

AIR-DOWN & RISE UP TO THE CHALLENGE!

NEWBIE WOMEN WHEELERS

Wendi Norton

Fast cars and motorcycles, that's what Wendi knew and loved. She was born into them. Her Mom was a weekend amateur drag racer, in Indiana where Wendi grew up. She received her first motorcycle when she was five years old, and with it came a small motocross track built by her father in the field behind their house. Her first time behind the wheel of a car was when she was eight years old. Her father would let her sit on his lap, while he controlled the pedals in her mom's 1979 Corvette Stingray. Wendi purchased her dream car. A 25th Anniversary Trans Am GT, with which she referred to her driving style as "Drive it like you stole it"!

Wendi became a Registered Nurse because she knew she wanted to help people. After her son went away to college, she became a travel nurse, and moved to California. Several years later, she met the love of her life and remarried. Soon after, they moved to Kansas to be closer to her father-in-law. She and her wife traveled frequently and were living their best life.

In 2019, at forty-eight years old, her whole world changed. Wendi suffered a stroke, which left her with weakness on her right side, cognitive deficits such as difficulty multitasking, word finding, memory issues and she stuttered when she spoke. Knowing this would most likely end her nursing career, she questioned what her life would be like. Still in the hospital, her wife told her that she should buy a Jeep. That was it, Wendi knew her world was upside down! She couldn't grasp why her wife would even say something like that, because she loved fast cars. Her wife then explained that since she knew absolutely nothing about Jeeps, it would be the perfect therapy for her brain to learn new things.

Within a couple of weeks of being released from the hospital, Wendi took her advice and went to the local Jeep Dealership to look at one. As soon as the salesman pulled around in the new 2019, Jeep Wrangler JLU Sahara, in Bikini Pearl, it was love at first sight! She immediately signed a three-year lease, thinking that if she didn't like it, she would just turn it back in.

Two weeks after the purchase, Wendi took it to a local ORV park for a club sponsored event for women. The event was advertised for women, no experience necessary, and stock vehicles welcome. The only instructions she received was which line of vehicles to get in, and "Don't worry, your Jeep can do more than you think it can". As

she ^{was} sitting in her Jeep, a man yelled out to everyone, “Is everyone air’d-down and disconnected”? She had no idea what he was talking about, and she didn’t want to look stupid. She said yes, and immediately hoped that wasn’t something important! Then she remembered that there was a small badge on her Jeep that had “Trail Ready” stamped on it, so she figured it would be ok. She went out with a group of ten vehicles. She was freaking out most of the time, as she heard the branches scratching, clunking, and grinding noises. When the group all went back for lunch, she decided this would be the time to sneak out! She was so scared and upset! She met four other women at the exit gate who were leaving for very similar reasons!

After sitting at home for a few days and feeling sorry for herself, Wendi remembered those few moments on that trail when she thought it was fun. She was never one to back down from a challenge, but she didn’t have any prior experience with a Jeep. She wondered if she could even learn about the sport with her lack of cognitive abilities, not to mention her physical weakness on her dominant right side.

Later that same day her mom called her. Wendi told her all about her day on the trails, how scared she had been and that she didn’t think she would ever be able to do it. Her mom told her that she shouldn’t be out there doing dangerous things in her condition. Then her mom said something that jolted her out of her self-pity moment! Her mom told her that she was getting too old to be out there doing such crazy things. What?!?!...wait a minute! She was only forty-eight years old! Wendi didn’t feel old. Cheated maybe, by how her stroke left her mind and body, but not old!

For months she continued watching videos, reading material, and going on small trails with her Jeep. She also went to a women’s only workshop about recovery skills. She was looking at doing some minor modifications to her Jeep, and that’s when she realized...her brain was retaining so much of the new information! She was also getting stronger physically, her stutter was completely gone, and she was feeling good! She even went to an offroad event in Southern Missouri with the local 4x4 club.

She had been working on her driving skills for months, and she was having a blast! She was feeling so strong! She knew in her mind that she would completely recover from the stroke! She had already come so far, and next month would be one year from the day she suffered her stroke and the day she bought her Jeep!

March 11, 2020, she was sitting at a stop light, waiting to turn. BAM!!! Something threw her forward in her Jeep, as far as her seatbelt would allow. She looked around but couldn’t figure out what had just happened. She started to exit her Jeep, but realized the ground was much further away. Still trying to figure it out, she managed to climb down and out of her Jeep. Then she saw it...there was a vehicle under her Jeep! Still looking around, she noticed there was a smashed car behind the car that was now under her Jeep and the front of her Jeep was pressed against the vehicle in front of her. She didn’t see it

coming. She had been rear ended by a vehicle estimated to be going 60 mph! This resulted in a traumatic brain injury, with bleeding in her brain.

After being evaluated by the different therapies and attending weekly sessions of each, her deficits were identified. She had PTSD, her eyes had difficulty holding a horizontal position, she had difficulty controlling her emotions, which resulted in episodes of rage when she needed to multitask. She had cognitive deficits that included, the inability to add and/or subtract numbers that were larger than 10 and didn't comprehend that colors are made by combining other colors. She also became confused when driving. She didn't recognize where she was, and to make it worse she didn't think to ask anyone. An example of what this looked like, she would leave her house to go to the grocery store. The store was only 10 minutes from her house. Somewhere between home and the store she forgot where she was going, and just keep driving. Sometimes she would ride around town, while other times she would end up in a different city. When this was discovered she and her wife decided to use "Find a Friend" on their phones to track where she was. She would let her wife know when she was going somewhere, and her wife would monitor where she was. If she had been gone longer than anticipated her wife would look at her location. So, if she was somewhere out of the usual, her wife would call and tell her to press the "Home" location on her maps app and come home. This made her friends call her Sqwerl more often than Wendi.

Her Jeep and off-roading gave her a purpose and goals. She would use those to recover! She noticed a group, for ladies only, out West was having a camping/trail riding week in the Arizona mountains. She had previously taken their Recovery Skills workshop that was hosted at a local 4x4 parts store. The instructor for the group was very knowledgeable about off-roading, and she thought this would be a perfect way for her to learn more. It would also push her cognitive abilities because she would be driving 1,200 miles to get there by herself! She would have her wife keeping track of her on her phone. Covid was still an issue, and people were asked to maintain social distancing. This would be perfect. She would be in her Jeep by herself, and since it was camping, they would all be outside, which made social distancing easy. A month later she packed her Jeep and headed to Arizona!

She met so many women who went off-roading. The things taught that week were repeated over, and over which helped her to retain a lot of it. She not only received the information, but she was also able to practice it out on the trails.

After being back for a week, she called a couple of the women that she had met during her very first trail ride...the one that scared her! She told them where she had gone and what she had learned, and asked if them if they would like to go to a local offroad park with her where she could relay to them what she had learned. They all said yes, and that next weekend, Wendi was out on the trails passing along the information and skills that she had learned. It was empowering for everyone that day. At the end of the day, they all

stopped to air up their tires, and spent some time talking about various things. They all said that they felt less stress that day. They also said things like there weren't any guys around that made them feel dumb asking questions, they didn't feel intimidated, and they loved learning with like-minded women!

Wendi began traveling from coast to coast, going off-road in her Jeep. She still had several cognitive issues, but they were getting better and better. She started to feel that she had some control over her life again. She kept pushing herself by wheeling with different groups, learning as much as she could, and practicing the things she learned as often as she could. Repetition and trying new things were helping her brain recover.

Wendi knew she wasn't an "expert" wheeler, nor did she claim to be. She also knew that there is always more to learn and different styles to try. However, she knew that it was very important to build confidence when they are learning new things! This is where she knew she could excel!!!

Each time she came back from a wheeling trip, she would create an event on her Facebook page. She called it Newbie Women Wheelers. She knew there were women out there that were new to off-roading but wanted to learn more. She fully understood the basics and knew she could pass the knowledge and skills she had learned to them.

She talked with the owners of a local ORV park, Kansas Rocks and Recreational Park. They were completely supportive and offered her the ability to hold her events at their park, and they would create a special weekend package for her that would include the education, driving instruction and camping. Due to liability, taxes, and other factors it was decided that her newbie group would officially become Newbie Women Wheelers LLC. September 2023, it was officially done. Her first event at the park was in October 2023. There would be many more coming in 2024.

One of the first thing off-roaders do when going wheeling is air-down their tires, which is super easy. Out on the trail, when we conquer our fears, we feel empowered! That is how Wendi came up with the slogan for Newbie Women Wheelers: Air-Down & Rise Up to The Challenge! First you must air-down, and then you must rise up and face your fears to conquer them! Keep challenging yourself to get better!

Wendi plans to continue educating, empowering, and getting women involved in the offroad world for years to come. She has described it as her "calling".