



A Journey OF LIVES, LOVES AND AN R75/5 MOTORCYCLE

By James De Alba #165055

When I purchased my 1972 R75/5 from my buddy and co-worker, Cyrus, in 1989, I could never have imagined the journey that the bike and I would take together and how significantly it would change my life. At 26 years old, I had ridden my share of dirt bikes and motorcycles, when I learned that my friend Cyrus owned two /5s that he had brought with him when he moved from Sri Lanka—a black toaster tank and a white /5 that formerly served as a police bike. Classic BMW bikes were popular in San Francisco at that time, and when I saw Cyrus' motorcycles, I knew I had to have one. I couldn't talk him out of the black toaster tank, but when he agreed to sell me the white one for \$1500, I jumped on the deal. What I didn't realize at the time was that I wasn't only getting a sweet little ride but one that would be more collectible than the black toaster tank. Cosmetically, she was a little bit worn, but the look fit perfectly into my bohemian lifestyle in San Francisco—Pier 23 on Sundays, Savoy Tivoli in North Beach and a cruise up the coast with an occasional date on the back.

Life was good. I was just starting up a new import business, had some money in my pocket and a cool, vintage bike. It was a great time and a great ride, until the drive shaft broke. Then, I was a guy in need of new transportation. So, as the story goes, not unlike many other motorcycles owned by young men with a dream, my BMW found a little corner in my garage in the summer of '91, where it sat on my "to do" list to be brought back to life "one day."

While my /5 hibernated in the garage, I continued down life's highway with all its thrilling twists and turns, including the challenges of running a business, a 6-month stint in Mexico, a few great cars and a move to Los Angeles. While living in LA, I was on one of my trips to San Francisco, when my sister introduced me to Dolores, a beautiful and spirited Italian girl from Jersey. I've never wasted time in sealing a deal when I find a good thing and this was no different. We were engaged, then married and I moved her to LA within one year. Through all this, my /5 hung tight in the garage and waited patiently for the day she would be remembered and on the road again.

Soon after being married, we bought a home just 26 miles north of Los Angeles. The following summer we received a phone call from my nephew Salvador. Since his dad had recently moved the family to Mexico for the business, Sal decided that it would be a "win-win" scenario if he moved in with us to attend high school until his family moved back and then go on to university. As Dolores and I didn't have our own kids, we were not quite prepared for the teenager that descended upon us. This handsome, lanky kid rolled in with a smile and a teenage attitude full of questions, rules and opinions. He "taught" me lessons about "sharing" my things whenever he took my jacket, sneakers or whatever he thought was cool enough to call his own. The garage quickly turned into our sanctuary, where I shared hundreds of hours with Sal listening to an extensive genre of tunes, discussing the evolution of music, culture

and politics. He questioned me and shared his thoughts about the meaning of life, the complications and beauty of girls and relationships, and of course, we often just talked about cars and motorcycles. In those moments, I could never have known how important these memories and capsules of time would become, nor realized how my time with Sal would change my life. As there are some things only men can understand and relate to, Sal helped remind me that it's the simple things in life that can bring a man the most joy and peace—a great band, a good-looking girl who loves you and a cool ride.

After buying a few sport bikes, I soon realized that it was the perfect time to head up to San Francisco, rescue the BMW from the garage and get it running again. After years of ribbing from my nephews about the “abandoned motorcycle that would probably never run after so many years of solitude,” it was time to prove them wrong. We decided it would be the perfect project for the man cave.

As luck would have it, my cousin and Sal's dad were up for a visit a few weeks later. My cousin was a master mechanic. With his help and a little tinkering, we repaired the drive shaft, tweaked some electrical issues and got it running. I can still remember the smile on my nephew's and his dad's faces when it started up, which I'm sure was a mirror image of my own face. Okay, maybe cosmetically it was looking a little weathered, but it was running and ready to go, just in time for the Love Ride. I called my buddy who owned a black /5 to meet us for the ride. With much hesitation, my wife hopped on the back with a borrowed motorcycle jacket and we gave the /5 its first debut ride in the midst of thousands of motorcycles. With the sun shining, a smooth 50-mile cruise and a day ending with a concert including ZZ Top, my passion for classic bikes was rekindled.

It was the first of many Sunday rides with my wife on the back through the canyons of northern LA County and the beginning of many rides I would take alone. I had almost forgotten what a personal connection and Zen-like state of mind one experiences on a long bike ride that only a motorcycle rider can understand while maneuvering a bike through the corners, taking in the beautiful scenery on the straights and the camaraderie of connecting with fellow bikers along the way. Now being a bit older, I had a greater appreciation not only for the thrill of the ride but also the history of the machine, in particular BMW vintage bikes. I spent countless hours researching models, reading restoration manuals and fine



James and Dolores

tuning my knowledge regarding the details of what defines its authenticity. I found some great resources, ordered some parts from Germany and soon completed the first of many full mechanical restorations.

Fast forward a few years. More goals and dreams began to unfold and we found ourselves in the wine country of Sonoma owning a day spa (my wife's dream) and a beautiful home. My nephew Sal was living in SF when he called in January, first to make sure that we were going to call him on his birthday, and second to ask if he could “crash for three weeks” while he set his plan into action of living on the Russian River with a buddy and continuing his studies. A new Sal arrived at our house. The prep school teenager that we watched evolve into a more open-minded young man during the 1 1/2 years he lived with us had fully transformed into a great student with a thirst for knowledge and a “live and let live” bohemian soul of profound thought, who was set to take on the world. I took pride in knowing that I had some influence on the man he had become, with an appreciation for history, culture and the musical prophecies of incredible musicians including everyone from Bob Marley to the Beatles. We immediately fell back into our routine of retiring into the garage after a great home-cooked meal, but this time around it was more about the exchange of thoughts and ideas between two men than the mentoring of a teenager.

As the “three weeks” turned into a longer stint than expected, we decided that it was time to complete our project and do a full cosmetic restoration on the /5. I had already bought and sold a few other bikes with a mechanical or cosmetic restoration here and there, but this bike was a special project of ours and needed to be brought back to its original beauty. On a warm spring night after a barbeque, listening to music and hanging with a few of my nephews in the garage, the restoration began. We disassembled the bike and planned the first of what would be many full restorations in that garage. I sent out the parts to be painted and began to order all the finishing details. A month later, while still waiting to receive all of the parts, my wife planned a birthday party for me. Sal was planning a trip to a music festival on the weekend but spent Friday night with us and promised to at least share a toast with me on Saturday. That Friday would be our last “meeting of the minds” in the garage and our conversations that night are forever embedded in my heart and memory. Later, as we kept Dolores company in the kitchen while she prepared enough



James and buddy, David Dehnert, representing the black and white R75 in the Love Ride, 2001.



Photo by Allyson Wiley Photography

food for a small army, we listened to decades of music. On Saturday, with a house full of friends and family, Sal and my other nephew Chris, wished me a happy birthday and left my party to join their friends on the river for a reggae festival.

A few days later he returned with a slight fever and feeling like he was getting the flu. The following night, my wife and I cared for him while he assured us that he was probably experiencing the consequences of camping and long nights of music with little sleep. When his symptoms worsened the next morning, we took him to the emergency room and watched in disbelief as his health suddenly crashed. I'll never forget my last moments with him while he struggled and looked in my eyes while I grabbed his hand and encouraged him to fight. Moments later, I had to let go of his hand, while the doctors and nurses crowded around him attaching machines and tubes, and then I watched him slip away. My sister's first born, my nephew and one of my closest friends was taken from this world to begin a different journey.



Sal Ortiz

The road back was long and difficult, but I somehow again found solace in the long bike rides through the vineyards and restoring motorcycles. Back in my garage and wrenching on bikes seemed to somehow save me from a much darker period of my life. The name Salvador means savior, and not only did the project we started together and the memories of our conversations save me from the abyss of grief, but were instrumental in starting me on the path that would bring me the greatest gratification, the official opening of Sonoma Classic Motorbikes. I know

Sal was with me through the completion of the /5 restoration and many after. I could imagine his smile when we finished the final assembly of the /5. I still share many restoration hours in the shop with my other nephews, listening to music and reminiscing. I'm fortunate enough to live in a place where I can ride on most days of the year and my /5 gets lots of attention parked in the Sonoma plaza at the end of long ride. These days, whenever I'm riding into the sunset, taking a Sunday ride with my wife or focusing on a challenging turn, I always know that there's an angel on my shoulder. ☺

James is the owner of Sonoma Classic Motorbikes in Sonoma, California. SCM specializes in restorations and custom builds of classic motorcycles. De Alba's clients and fellow classic motorcycle enthusiasts include; actor David Cubitt, Le Mans race car driver and winery owner Pierre Ehret and Sam Bernstein, one of the world's leading scholars and dealers of Chinese jade and brother of legendary drag car racer, Kenny Bernstein.

James has always had a passion and affinity for the BMW classics which has become a strong focus of the shop. Alongside his premium standard restorations of the classics i.e.; R69s, R50 and R60, James' recent projects include a custom R69s cafe racer and an Rs54 race replica of the factory race bike ridden by Isle of Man racing legend, George Meyer. www.sonomaclassicmotorbikes.com, 707-227-2142. This article is dedicated to Sal Ortiz, our soul rebel - One Love, Forever.