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Local biker, 71, to carry flag in 9-11 parade in N.Y.

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Senior | Gail Neilson started riding a motorcycle when she was 48 years old

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After travelling back roads and stopping at small diners across North America for more than 20 years with Motor Maids, Gail Neilson said she's not surprised by the reaction she receives when she parks her motorcycle and pulls off her helmet.



"Someone will come over and say, 'You're riding those big bikes out there?' " she said.

"They say, 'Well, you don't look like a biker.' Well no, I just shaved my beard."

Motor Maids Inc. is a motorcycle association for women.

It was established in 1940 and has about 1,200 member in Canada and the United States.

Cole Burston/The Daily Gleaner

Gail Neilson of the Village of Gagetown is a member of Motor Maids and will be carrying the Canadian flag in the 9-11 memorial parade in New York City

At 71 years of age, the Gagetown woman said she knows she doesn't fit the biker stereotype. But on Sept. 11, her blue shirt, black pants and white gloves will fit the biker dress code perfectly as she heads to New York to carry the Canadian flag as Motor Maids escort firefighters to Ground Zero for the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. About 12 women from Canada are taking part in the event.

Nelson, who started driving a motorcycle at 48 years old, said she's had the chance to do a lot of different things through her involvement with the Motor Maids. However, the rally is the most important event she's attended as part of the group. She said she was surprised when she was asked to carry the Canadian flag.

"I got a call from the district director (of Motor Maids) in Maine asking if I would carry the Canadian flag," she said. "I've carried it before in small parades, so I was like, 'Well, yes. I'd be honoured.' "

But getting used to driving with a flag on her bike again wasn't the only thing Neilson had to do to get ready for the trip. As part of their uniform for the ride, Motor Maids were also asked to don helmets borrowed from their local fire departments.

To find the perfect helmet, Neilson turned to the Village of Gagetown Volunteer Fire Department, where she ended up getting a helmet from one of the first female firefighters in New Brunswick.

Linda Sullivan said she joined the Village of Gagetown Volunteer Fire Department more than 30 years ago with a friend.

Like today, the fire department was led by volunteers, meaning when the men were away at work no one could respond to the calls.

"I've always needed that little bit of an adrenaline rush to keep going," Sullivan said.

Since moving up to captain in the fire department, she said, she doesn't spend as much time running into burning buildings anymore.

She said she was overwhelmed when Neilson asked to wear her helmet to the rally.

"I'm honoured that my helmet is going to be in New York," Sullivan said.

"You don't think of the glory; you're just there to help. You're there in a lot of bad times, and you don't think of anything positive coming out of this, so this is really putting quite a spin on it. And to have a neighbour be the flag-bearer and taking my helmet, it's really quite an honour."

When Neilson returns from the rally, Sullivan said, the helmet will be retired.

But while she's excited to represent New Brunswick at the rally and share the ride with her fellow Motor Maids - she calls them her sisters - Neilson said she's starting to get nervous as the date draws closer.

"In my opinion, this could be one of the biggest deals," she said.

"You're centred in front of everybody, on national TV, and you don't want to drop your flag. You don't want to do something stupid."