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MATTHEW TULLY

A bill isn't just business; it's personal

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A bunch of bikers converged on the Statehouse last week, sporting black leather jackets, impressive Fu Manchus and a beef with a law that legislators passed last year.

The law funded spinal cord and brain injury research by slapping a \$10 fee on motorcycle registrations. Lawmakers passed the measure in the final days of the 2007 session, tucking it into the massive state budget bill.

They passed the fee quietly, but motorcyclists across the state have been complaining loudly about being singled out ever since. They've fumed to the media, to lawmakers and to the governor, a Harley rider himself.

On Wednesday, dozens of motorcyclists, looking like middle-aged extras from "Easy Rider," came to the Statehouse to support House Bill 1318, which would eliminate the \$10 fee. They showed up on the same day the House Roads and Transportation Committee held a hearing on the bill.

Carl "Pappy" Brown, 58, was one of the bikers who showed up. He lives on the Westside and has been riding motorcycles "since I was 5."

"You tack on a \$10 fee, and you only do it to motorcycles?" Brown said when I bumped into him on a Statehouse elevator. "You think that's not going to get any attention?"

With talk like that, and the image of decked-out bikers mixing with sober-faced lawmakers, I went to the committee hearing in search of a few laughs.

I found tears instead. They came when Fishers resident Darcy Keith stood up to testify in support of the bill, which would fund the spinal cord and brain injury research efforts with a 50-cent fee on most vehicle registrations, rather than the motorcycle-only fee.

Keith, 38, came with a personal story to tell. It began in 1991 when a semi rear-ended the car Keith, then a Ball State senior, was riding in. Two of her friends were killed, and she suffered a traumatic brain injury.

She credits her survival and recovery to "God's grace."

"That," she said, "and (because) I was first Life Lined to the University of Cincinnati Hospital, a research hospital."

Keith spends much of her free time speaking to youth groups and others about the importance of wearing seat belts and her grueling recovery. On Wednesday, she asked lawmakers to keep the fledgling research program alive.

"Brain injury survivors, with proper diagnosis and treatment from research, have a good chance of leading active, productive lives," Keith told the committee. "I am living proof."

At one point, she choked up. Rep. Carolene Mays, D-Indianapolis, sitting nearby, stood up and put her arm around Keith, encouraging her as she finished talking. The scene was a reminder that so many bills at the Statehouse stem from deeply personal stories and causes.

"My question to you," Keith said, "is what is your commitment to those servicemen and

women who are fighting to protect your freedom and return home with a brain injury? They fought for you. Are you going to fight for them, and others?"

The lawmakers listened. Then they approved the bill.

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