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Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Serious About Scooting: Willow Glen resident April Whitney sits atop her beloved 1978 Vespa P200. Whitney, a scooter aficionado since high school, is a member of the local Dana Scully Scooter Club.

Scooter group gathers women together for rides on wild side

Organizer says club encourages women to get out and have as much fun as the guys

By Kate Carter

Cover Story

[The Dana Scully Scooter Club encourages women to participate in a pastime dominated by men](#)

News

[City Beat](#)

[Developer changes proposed townhome development to accommodate neighborhood concerns](#)

[The Willow Glen Kiwanis Sunrisers honor high school seniors for making the grade](#)

[Police continue their search for a Willow Glen bank robbery suspect](#)

[Around the Glen](#)

Letters & Opinions

[Speak Out](#)

[Debbie Farmer: The down-and-dirty reality of becoming a real mother](#)

[Carl Heintze: The routine of marriage is hard to shake](#)

Neighbors

[Local Notebook](#)

[Cyclists gear up for Bike-to-Work Week](#)

Dozens of scooter-lovers crowd around the objects of their affection that are parked in rows, sparkling in the sun on a recent Saturday afternoon in front of Campbell's King's Head Pub. The scooters--mostly old Vespas--are painted all the colors of the rainbow--bright sky blue, brick red, shiny silver, electric purple--and some are decorated with stickers and accessories.

Most of the admirers are there with their own scooters to show off, usually men who can identify what makes each bike unique in its own special way.

But it is a woman to whom many of them look for direction in the day's events and who has helped make this weekend possible.

Willow Glen resident April Whitney is a member of the Vespa Club Los Gatos, the sponsoring scooter club of the May 4-6 Clasico Moto Italia scooter rally, held at locations in Campbell, Santa Clara and Los Gatos. But Whitney is also a member of a local all-female scooter club, the Dana Scully Scooter Club, which hopes to help women feel more comfortable participating in a pastime largely dominated by men.

"You don't find many women that ride," Whitney says. "We're trying to do things that really encourage women to ride. Historically, most women just sat on the back."

Motor scooters, two-wheeled bikes that go slower than motorcycles but faster than mopeds, are the vehicles of choice for groups of Americans who like their small, sleek style and signature spunky spirit. Scooters--more common Italian Vespas and Lambrettas, and rarer German Zündapps and Heinkels--can conjure up images of Europeans buzzing through narrow streets and hillside roads. The bikes are common in highly populated countries, such as India and Vietnam, where parking

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Gardening

[Environmentally friendly pest control alternatives are good for the planet](#)

Sports

[Sports Briefs](#)

[WGHS Rams in CCS division II playoffs](#)

[Willow Glen High School frosh-soph baseball team wins championship](#)

Calendar

[Lectures, readings, auditions, sports & recreation, announcements, theater & arts, kids' stuff, clubs, public meetings...](#)

Feedback

[Something to say?](#)

space and gas prices make cars less affordable.

Scooters have been popular in the United States since after World War II, when American servicemen, who used U.S. military versions to tool around Italy and Greece, came home clamoring for bikes to use here.

Scooters are usually associated with a 1960s "mod" scene, a time when style was dictated by London fashions and was carried over into how scooter riders individualized their rides.

Current scooter enthusiasts range from older collectors with money to spend on rare finds to younger riders, who own one or two for cheap, economical transportation and fun socialization. There are dozens of scooter clubs across the nation that hold gatherings, or "rallies," for riders and their ilk. Scooter lovers are also connected through Internet chat rooms and email lists that let them find out who's selling a 1968 Vespa 150 Sprint, where to get engine parts, or how to meet up with other scooter riders while on a business trip in New York City.

Whitney says that between 70 to 80 percent of scooter rally and club participants are men, although female scooter ridership is growing. Most clubs have both men and women, she says, but some women can feel a little intimidated by the competitive culture of some groups, or even by the zippy vehicles.

San Francisco resident Carrie Dubiner founded the Dana Scully Scooter Club, or DSSC, two years ago, after years of joking with her female motor-scooting friends about having an all-girls' club with "no rules."

"Guys always argue about the rules," Dubiner, now the group's "director" says. "We decided we weren't

going to take ourselves so seriously. Why be involved in a club that isn't fun?"

The club has about a dozen members split between the South Bay and San Francisco. It gets its name from the brainy, redheaded FBI agent (played by Gillian Anderson) on the "X-Files," who uses her smarts and her attitude to get to the bottom of government conspiracies, and keep men on their toes.

"She's a woman representing in a really male-dominated field," says DSSC "agent" Diana Franklin.

"She's got it together," Whitney chimes in, adding, "A high proportion of scooter riders are redheads," like both herself and the TV character.

Whitney, 30, has been a scooter aficionado since her high school days, she says. Back then, though, her parents didn't think the vehicles--some of which can achieve top speeds in the 70 mph range, though most rarely go faster than 50 mph--were safe enough for their daughter. They bought her a Volkswagen bug, instead.

"It couldn't even get up to 45," Whitney says.

Once she got her first "real job" and her first bonus, she decided to buy herself a scooter. She approached her Willow Glen neighbor, Patrick Adams, who also rides scooters, and asked where she could find one for about \$1,000.



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Rallying Cry: Members of the Dana Scully Scooter Club, from left, Gretchen Himes, Laura Patton, Lori Braithwaite, Diana Franklin and April Whitney pose with their scooters in front of the King's Head Pub in Campbell. The group gathered over the weekend to participate in the Classico Moto Italia Rally.

These days, most scooters sell for between \$2,000 and \$4,000, so Whitney was looking for a real deal. But a week later, she says, Adams had found a listing for a bright orange one--a 1978 Vespa P200E--that also matched her hair.

The two went out to pick it up, but Adams had to ride it home for her, as Whitney had never driven a scooter before.

Now, though, she says she uses her scooter to ride from her Willow Glen home to work in Santa Clara on most days. The scooter tops out at 55 mph, which is fine for her commute along traffic-clogged highways 87 and 101. "Most people aren't going fast, anyway," she says.

Her scooter's gas mileage, as with most scooters, is in the 50-mpg range or higher, which can make the eye-catching bikes even more attractive to perceptive SUV drivers.

Whitney says most scooter riders know each other, from meeting in clubs, at rallies and at the three or

four local scooter shops and dealers. Unknown riders are immediately noticed, she says, because most scooterers recognize others' bikes.

Part of the fun of riding scooters, or even of just loving them, is spending time with others who do, too.

"The scooter scene is a way to keep in touch with good friends," Dubiner says. "Part of the reason is to show people how much fun it is and how different we all are."

Whitney, who works in event promotion, helps put together the DSSC's events, which have included a holiday ball and last year's Halloween weekend-long party that, unfortunately, got rained on, but not out, she says. She also maintains the club's website and writes its newsletter.

Anyone can join DSSC, Dubiner says, as long as she is a woman who has a scooter and who likes--"or says she likes"--Dana Scully. And even then, it seems, the group makes exceptions.

DSSC "assistant director" Gretchen Himes has been a club member since its inception, but at that time she wasn't riding a scooter of her own. She got interested in scooting, she says, after living in Europe with her Swiss husband, and riding on the back of his scooter.

Himes says she never felt very comfortable driving a scooter herself, especially not in California's driving environment. But after years of going to rallies, being in the club, and watching everyone else have all the fun, she bought her own 1963 Lambretta Silver Special in December.

"All of my girlfriends are doing it. Why can't I do it?" Himes says. "I'm a beginner, and I'm having a lot of fun. When people see you ride up, they say, 'Oh, cool, it's a girl.'"

Whitney says she has plans to hold some events to give women more confidence on their scooters. She says she's working on a DSSC workshop where women riders can practice and get tips on staying balanced while "slow riding" and completing obstacle courses, called gymkhanas. Both activities are competitions held at scooter rallies that showcase riders' skills, but the rallies' competitive atmospheres can inhibit women from giving the events a try, she says.

The challenge, Whitney says, to holding DSSC activities, is to find a time when the many other clubs aren't holding rallies of their own. Scooter clubs try to support each other by attending their rallies--Whitney says she went to 11 last year alone--and members build friendships with riders from other states whom they see once or twice a year.

Whitney also helps to plan the Vespa Club Los Gatos' events that include the biennial rally, as well as a vintage scooter day, held during alternating years. This year's rally included Friday night bowling; Saturday competitions, evening ride and night show; and a Sunday morning ride and barbecue.

On May 5, coffee shop patrons in Santa Clara stared out the windows as dozens of festive scooters, carrying stylishly dressed riders drove up and parked out front. The group of riders, on "scooter time," Whitney says, finally gathered at about 8:30 p.m. for the 7:30 p.m. departure of the night ride that would weave its way down the Alameda to Lincoln Avenue and back to the pub in Campbell for live entertainment.

Engines revving, the scooters filled the darkening air with a sweet-and-sour exhaust smell and a racing roar. The ride leader finally took off into the traffic, soon followed by a line of bikes trailing down the

block.

Watching DSSC, and the other scooter riders, the onlookers perhaps felt what Vespa Club Los Gatos member Andy Hospodor had voiced earlier in the day: "It almost makes you want to be a girl. They have more fun."

For more information about the Dana Scully Scooter Club, visit

www.chickpages.com/filmfreaks/aprillynn1/DSSC.html

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