

Mechanic, apprentice find common ground at D & D Automotive

BY JOE HANSEN
The Cottage Sentinel

On the morning of Thurs., Feb. 15, someone has cranked the thermostat way up in the workroom at D&D Automotive in Cottage Grove, turning the garage into a balmy, sweaty space.

"I didn't do it, I've never even seen the thermostat," cracks Larry Woody, an auto mechanic and owner of D&D. Everyone laughs, even though his joke touches on a sensitive issue. Woody is blind, the result of an auto accident — he was struck by a tractor-trailer on Interstate 5 in April of 2002.

Larry speaks as he's pulling the tires off of a car that's raised on a hydraulic lift, and behind him his new apprentice, 17 year-

old Otto Shima of Cottage Grove High School, listens intently — or rather, he watches intently as his interpreter, J.J. Johansson, signs Woody's words to him.

Otto is deaf, but that certainly hasn't stopped him from pursuing his interest in learning how to be a mechanic. He's participating in a kind of work experience program through the High School, so he comes to D&D twice a week and helps out Woody and company as they perform various mechanical procedures.

"I like to take them apart, fix things — anything about cars," says Otto, speaking via proxy through Johansson.

Does he think his disability hinders his chances of being a professional mechanic when he's older?

"No," he indicates with a simple shake of his head that requires no translation.

Otto was born with partial hearing, but at this point he relies on interpreters and a canny ability to read lips to communicate. He's a success story for what is becoming a world-class special education program at Cottage Grove High School that now has three full-time interpreters for the hearing-impaired.

Otto is a 17-year old freshman, the result of a rocky education before getting where he needed to be at CGHS. Now he's training to be a mechanic, and he plays for the JV II basketball team.

J.J., who says enthusiastically that her job is "the best job in the world," spends mornings with Otto and then trades off with

some of the other interpreters. She and others go to his basketball practices and games, signing the coaches' instructions and player communications.

But, she says, coming to D&D is the real pleasure.

It's easy to see why; the mood in the shop is lively and good-natured, a fact that has a lot to do with Larry.

"You know what I like about cameras?" he asks. "The flash doesn't bother me."

Talk about a great attitude.

By all accounts, Larry is lucky to be alive; he



Photo by Joe Hansen

Larry Woody, mechanic and owner of D&D Automotive in Cottage Grove, was left completely blind after a 2002 car accident. He has taken on a deaf apprentice, Otto Shima of CGHS.

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escaped the head-on collision with cracked ribs, a broken back, severe lacerations and terrible damage to his face and eyes. After 7 1/2 hours of surgery, he was put back together, but he's been left completely blind. In 2006, though, his dream was realized with the opening of his own auto shop, D&D Automotive.

"I've pretty much been working on cars, in some form or another, for my entire life," says Larry, who didn't see his injury as any reason to stop being a mechanic.

Now he listens to fuel lines and engines and feels his way around under the hood by memory. He has the inside of his shop down pat, and he knows the inner workings of an automobile by heart.

It's easy to forget that Larry is blind, as he works his way

around a car, pulling the tires off and feeling around under the hood, trying to visualize what he's touching.

"I guess I do hear, feel and smell things that other people don't, but not because my senses are necessarily any better than theirs," he says. "It's just that I'm relying on them a lot more."

Otto has been coming to D&D since the beginning of the New Year, and this morning he's on the ball, using power tools to remove the wheels and looking over Larry's shoulder at the engine, just watching his interpreter out of the corner of his eye. It doesn't



Photo by Joe Hansen

Otto Shima takes the wheel off of a car at D&D automotive.

look like his lack of hearing is causing any trouble at all.

For Larry, when he was approached about taking Otto on, it was a no-brainer.

"I didn't even think about his disability," says Larry. "I'm one that, I would hope, people would look past my disability — and his."