

Under the hood, even behind the wheel, Larry Woody excels without sight



BRIAN DAVIES / The Register-Guard

**Mechanic Larry Woody** (right), blinded in a car accident, teaches Otto Shima, 17, a Cottage Grove High student who is deaf. J.J. Johansson interprets.

# His drive is the key

BY ANDREA DAMEWOOD  
The Register-Guard

**C**OTTAGE GROVE — Cars have been Larry Woody's life for more than 30 years. For most of his working days, he has earned a living as a mechanic and, in his spare time, he restores vintage rides.

His signature number, 77, could be read in a blur as he raced around the Cottage Grove Speedway.

And it was in a car that his life completely changed. On April 16, 2002, Woody was heading north on Interstate 5 near Saginaw when a southbound truck blew across the median and

## LARRY WOODY ONLINE

See video of Larry Woody on the CBS Evening News and, on his Web site, in his race car

- ◆ [www.cbsnews.com/sections/assignment\\_america/main500617.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/assignment_america/main500617.shtml)
- ◆ [www.larrywoody.com](http://www.larrywoody.com)

drove over his tiny Toyota Celica.

He almost died, suffering broken ribs, a lower back fracture and severe damage to his face and eyes. He spent 7½ hours in surgery as doctors essentially rebuilt his face from jawbones

to eyebrows.

"I always told my wife I felt safer on the race track than out there on the interstate," Woody said wryly. "I didn't have to prove her right."

Yet, five years later, Woody, 46, says he's fundamentally the same person: He still works on his 1968 El Camino, he continues to dabble in racing and, within the past year, he bought his own shop, D & D Foreign Automotive in Cottage Grove.

Except now he does it all blind.

But his red-tipped cane stands idle near an office door. He walks without hesitation

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through his shop.

He handles all of D & D's paperwork and billing with an exacting organizational system and a talking computer.

A full-time mechanic, Ryan Zuvich, does most of the technical work — test drives and intricate jobs that require sight — but Woody is still known to head into the garage and change fuel lines, hoist cars and change filters.

"So much of it is done by feel anyway," he said. "I use my hands to see what I'm doing now."

One more set of hands, belonging to 17-year-old Otto Shima, an apprentice from Cottage Grove High School, helps around the shop.

The two get along wonderfully, even though they have never spoken to each other directly.

Shima was born deaf.

Their conversation happens through interpreter J.J. Johansson, who accompanies Shima on his twice-weekly visits to the shop. Her hands fly as she first translates what Woody says to Shima and then turns and voices his reply.

During a recent tutorial, the two stood under the open hood of a Toyota truck in need of new parts in its clutch system.

Woody felt among various boxes until he grasped the right one. Removing a hose, he ran his fingers along it, telling Shima, who watched intently, what role it played in the engine.

"He's just another student and I'm just another guy trying to help him," Woody said. "I kinda put the disabilities aside."

Shima, who has always wanted to work on cars, said Woody inspires him because "he never gives up."

Someday, he hopes to work at D & D or own his own business, which he'll call "Otto Shop."

Woody said his goal, both in teaching Shima and by telling his story is "to let people know that Otto's deaf and I'm blind, but we're still humans, so don't treat us any differently."

### Racing once more

A little more than a year after his accident, Woody was in a place usually forbidden to the blind — behind the wheel of a race car.

Taking direction from a friend through an earbud, he drove a buddy's car about 30 mph around the Cottage Grove Speedway track at least 25 times.

"Every time I think about that evening, I still smile," he said. "It was an amazing feeling — feeling that car around me."

The next summer, he was at it again, doing a couple of demolition derbies in an Oldsmobile modified to allow a passenger to sit with him and be his eyes.

Woody's amazing antics and remarkable adaptation eventually garnered him and Shima national attention. On March 9, their story aired on the "CBS Evening News."

His tale was sent in by customer Kathleen Albin, who is a D & D customer.

She mailed CBS a letter because "it was such an easy thing to do. There's so much negative stuff on the news."

Albin never expected to receive a reply, but soon afterward, reporter Steve Hartman was on his way to spend two days with Woody.

"A lot of people asked me, 'Were you nervous with the camera on?'" he said, adding he was "flabbergasted" hearing his voice on national TV. "And I said, 'No, I didn't even know it was on!' It was just me talking to another person."

Since the segment aired, Woody said he has received grateful calls from people in Texas, Florida and Ohio; some blind, some not.

One particularly touching call came from a man in Orlando, Fla.

The man could see, but he recently had dropped out of flight school, too intimidated to take his final exam.

"He told me, 'If you can do what you're doing in your condition, I have no excuse. I'm going back,'" Woody said. "That's what it's all about right there, helping someone I don't know."

Woody is also inspiring to local blind people, said Kathleen O'Gieblyn, a vocational rehabilitation counselor at the Eugene Oregon Commission for the Blind, who worked with Woody after his accident.

She called his story "extremely empowering," and said she tells many of her clients about his success in a line of work not typically suited to those without sight.

"He went from 20-20 (vision) to blind instantly; that's rather rare," O'Gieblyn said. "Larry's been remarkable in that he went to work right away, right after recovering from the hospital. As far as I understand it, there wasn't much time that he felt sorry for himself."

### Passion for his work

Woody agreed there was no time for him to mope after his wreck, saying he has had a passion for work his whole life.

"Some people wake up and say, 'Oh, man, I've gotta go to work,'" he explained. "But I wake up and say, 'Oh man, I get to go to work.'"

Born and raised in Cottage Grove — a self-described "lifer" — he left high school to get a job. He married his sweetheart, Della, in 1978, and the couple had a daughter, Jennifer, and a son, Nick, both of whom are grown and live in town.

So with help from Della, and training from a team at the Oregon Commission for the Blind, he set a lofty goal: to return to work by January 2003, less than a year after his accident.

He tackled the daunting task of learning to read Braille, walk with a cane and operate in total darkness.

When his recovery left him sidelined, he was frustrated and stir crazy. A couple of unanticipated tree branches to the face was more than he could take at times.

But perhaps his most important coping skill is humor.

One branch he walked into in Eugene, after all, turned out to be the wing of a topiary bird extending over the sidewalk.

And, he jokes, some of his skills have improved since becoming blind.

"I have gotten better at: one, walking in the dark, two, reading in the dark, and three, being organized," he said.

"Everything has got its place. You take your shoes off at night, you can see where you left them. I have got to know where I left mine."

He credits his driven personality, his wife and family, and a constant need to be near the machines he loves with keeping him motivated. He achieved his goal of returning to work, and he worked for others until he bought D & D about nine months ago.

"To me, to listen to these cars run is music," he said. "It's a good sound, and a good feeling."