

Being blind has not robbed him of vision

Abilities | Larry Woody inspires others as he runs his Cottage Grove auto repair shop

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COTTAGE GROVE — Cars have been Larry Woody's life for more than 30 years. He fixed them, he raced them, he restored them.

But five years ago on Interstate 5, a truck blew across the median and drove over his tiny Toyota Celica. He lost his sight and almost died.

But Woody, 46, still works on his 1968 El Camino, dabbles in racing and recently bought his own shop, D & D Foreign Auto-

motive, in Cottage Grove. And he has hired a deaf assistant.

His red-tipped cane stands idle. He walks without hesitation through his shop. He handles the paperwork and billing with the help of a talking computer. He still changes fuel lines, hoists cars and changes filters.

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

He has hired Otto Shima, 17, an apprentice from Cottage Grove High School, but they have never spoken directly. Shima was born deaf.

Interpreter J.J. Johansson 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.

Recently the two stood under the open hood of a truck in need of clutch parts.

Woody felt among boxes until he grasped the right one. Removing a hose, he ran his fingers along it, telling Shima 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 said that Woody inspires him because "he never gives up."

About a year after his accident, Woody was 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 at least 25 times. The next summer he did a couple of demolition derbies in an Oldsmobile modified to allow a passenger to sit with him and be his eyes.

This month he got a spot on the CBS Evening News. Since then he has received grateful calls from people, some blind, some not.

He said a caller from Florida said he had recently 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."

Kathleen O'Gieblyn, a vocational rehabilitation counselor at the Eugene Oregon Commission for the Blind, worked with Woody following his accident. She called his story "extremely empowering."

Woody left high school to work in 1978 and married his sweetheart, Della. With help from Della and the Oregon Commission for the Blind he vowed to return to work less than a year after his accident. He learned Braille, to walk with a cane and to operate in total darkness.

"Some people wake up and say, 'Oh, man, I've gotta go to work.' I get up and say, 'Oh man, I get to go to work,'" Woody said.