

Nothing keeps Larry Woody from his passions: car repair and racing—not even blindness

By **Kathy McCarron**

Tire Business staff

COTTAGE GROVE, Ore.—The next time you grumble about fixing a leaky gasket or feeling your way around an engine chassis, imagine working on a vehicle—or even running an auto repair shop—while blind.

That is the daily reality for Larry Woody, who owns D&D Automotive in Cottage Grove, where he repairs vehicles and handles the day-to-day operations of the business. Mr. Woody, 46, has worked on cars for 29 years but five years ago

he was in a car accident that nearly claimed his life and did claim his eyesight.

Amazingly, his years of experience as a mechanic and his sheer determination, as well as a healthy sense of pride and humor, got him back under the hood again. “When I walk around town, I don’t carry a white cane,” Mr. Woody told *Tire Business*. “That’s for blind people. I’m just a guy who can’t see.”

After the April 2002 traffic accident in which a lumber truck crossed the highway median and crashed into Mr. Woody’s car, he was hospitalized with a broken

back, cracked ribs, severe lacerations and extensive damage to his face and eyes. Even as he was recuperating in the hospital, though, he was already back to work as a shop manager, as his boss routinely contacted him with questions about auto shop business.

“That’s what I wanted,” he recalled. He added that at the time, “I set a goal for myself of Jan. 1, 2003, to be through the rehabilitation and recovery process and training process and be ready to go back to work.”

He met most of his goal with
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Larry Woody works under the hood of a car in his auto service shop.

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the help of the Oregon Commission for the Blind, but returning to his job was a different issue.

Working on cars without sight "came fairly easy to me because of determination," Mr. Woody said, noting that a lot of repair work "is done by feel anyway." After leaving the hospital he worked on family members' vehicles, putting together the parts of a four-wheeler, fixing the brakes on his wife's car, changing the belts on his car and replacing the water pump on a parent's car.

But his boss kept finding reasons for Mr. Woody to not return to his old job and finally let it slip that he felt a blind mechanic would be a liability, Mr. Woody recalled. So he responded: "I'm going to make it work—for me."

Frustrated working essentially as a receptionist at the repair shop, Mr. Woody left the job, stayed home for a while and even thought about retirement. Then he found a job at another repair shop, but that didn't work out either and he stayed home another five months. He finally de-

ecided to open his own business and bought D&D Automotive from the retiring owner in July 2006. Ironically, the former owner is now back working full time for Mr. Woody.

"I love what I'm doing. I look forward to going to work," Mr. Woody said.

And business has been good.

The shop works on an average of four to six cars a day. He said most customers are pleased with the shop's work. He does some routine auto maintenance work, which a tech will verify for him. But mostly he focuses on day-

to-day operations with the help of technology.

He uses a screen reader for the computer, a talking tire gauge, a talking calculator, a talking tape measure and a voice recorder for notes and information. A big plus was the addition of an adaptive AllSystemsMax shop manage-



Two days a week Larry Woody (left) tutors Otto, a 17-year-old hearing-impaired student, shown with his interpreter, J.J. Johansson.

ment software system designed especially for him by Flexible Systems L.L.C. after the company heard about Mr. Woody's accident.

Recently many others across the country, and even internationally, have heard about Mr. Woody's comeback story. In addition to coverage in local newspaper articles—which were picked up by news wire services and republished in many newspapers—he was featured on a recent segment of "CBS Evening News" in March.

Since then Mr. Woody said he has been contacted by a few people who are visually impaired, including someone who was interested in getting into body shop work. But Mr. Woody shrugs off the fame, saying, "I'm just an old country boy doing what I enjoy doing."

Grateful for the support of his wife Della, Mr. Woody said his role model through his whole ordeal has been his son Nick, who also became disabled in an accident when he was a high school senior in 1996. Now 29, Nick is wheelchair bound but drives a car, rides four-wheelers (sometimes with his dad) and runs his own appliance sales business two blocks from his father's auto shop.

That's not the end of Mr. Woody's amazing story.

He is now tutoring a deaf intern. For two days a week, the 17-year-old local high school student comes to the repair shop with his interpreter and is taught and supervised by Mr. Woody as he disassembles motors and learns other auto service work.

And when Mr. Woody's not at work? He has dabbled in his pre-accident hobby of taking a spin around the local racetrack—behind the wheel of a race car.

A veteran of the Cottage Grove Speedway track before he lost his sight, Mr. Woody wanted to try driving, just one more time, with directions given to him through an carpiece. For his first night on the track, about a year after the accident, "I wanted to do it for me. I wanted to do it one more time—to feel the thunder (of the motor) and the rush again," he said, recalling his few laps around the track.

Then track owners invited him to drive the race car around the track again the next night for the crowd in the stands. "So the second night I wanted to do it for the fans with disabilities in the stands," he said. "I wanted to show people, 'Hey, just because you may have some disability, life is not over... You can do the best you can or you can give up. I chose to do the best I can.'"

Since then he has driven in a couple of demolition derbies with a passenger serving as his eyes.