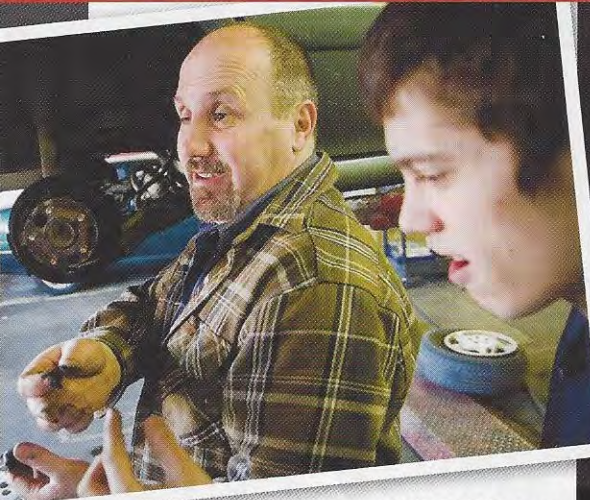


DEADSET TRADIE LEGEND



THE BLIND LEADING THE DEAF: Larry Woody and apprentice Otto Shima.

OUTTA SIGHT!

Auto mechanic works blind – with his deaf apprentice

WHEN Larry Woody's Toyota Celica was totalled in a car accident five years ago, the American mechanic lost his eyesight. But instead of feeling sorry for himself, he pulled his finger out and went back to work – totally blind.

Now he owns a repair business – D & D Automotive – in his hometown of Cottage Grove, Oregon.

Woody changes fuel lines, hoists cars and changes filters in the shop. He has a cane but has memorised where everything is so he doesn't come a cropper.

"I look with my hands, when I'm working on a vehicle," the 46-year-old told THE TRADIE. "A lot of the work is done by feel anyway."

He employs a full-time mechanic, Mark Scnear, who does most of the vehicle work, while Larry orders parts, talks to customers and fixes schedules. If a job on a car comes along that doesn't require sight, Mark will give it up for Larry.

He also uses a computer with a speech program on it and has learnt Braille. He's come a long way since that fateful day in April 2002 when an out of control truck almost ended his life.

Back then – after seven-and-a-half hours of life-saving surgery – things didn't look so bright. The top half of his face had been reconstructed and plastic eyes inserted into the sockets. He was 42 and desperate to get on with life, but who would employ him now?

"After my wreck and getting out of

hospital, my employer wasn't too keen on bringing a blind guy into his shop," Larry says. "So I thought, 'Who's going to hire a 40-something blind mechanic?' Not many people. In order for me to stay in the automotive field, I thought buying a shop would be the best thing."

With encouragement from his wife Della, Larry bought D & D one-and-a-half years ago and so far business has been good.

But every day has its challenges. Apart from seeing Della, his son, daughter and daughter-in-law, the thing Larry misses most is his independence.

"If you get up in the morning, you might go to your car and drive to work," Larry says. "I get up in the morning, and luckily my wife brings me to work, and if

she can't do it my son does, who works nearby. I feel a burden on my family. If my wife wants to do something different, she has to ask, "How are you going to get home tonight?"

He's also had to give up reading because calloused mechanic's fingers make it difficult to feel Braille.

But around the shop, Larry is in his element – and humour plays a big part in getting through the day.

"We have a good time," he says. "I was doing some work under a car today, and needed some safety glasses for protection and Mark said, 'Here they are – they're a little bit scratched up.' And I said (laughs), 'As if I care!'"

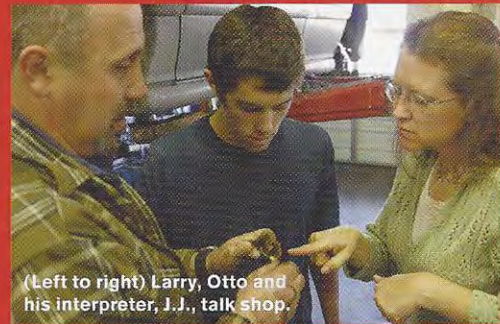
Naturally, he's made a few hilarious blunders, too.



Larry Woody overcomes his blindness by using his fingers to feel his way around the engine.

TILL DEAF DO US PART

Larry's deaf apprentice Otto Shima hopes one day to run his own repair shop and call it – *hyuk hyuk* – Otto Parts! The bond between he and Larry is special because there is almost no way they can communicate without an interpreter, although Larry says Otto can hear a little bit, so there is some direct interaction. "I didn't plan to employ a disabled person," he says. "He's just another student and I'm just another guy trying to help him."



(Left to right) Larry, Otto and his interpreter, J.J., talk shop.

You become more aware."

One bloke in the shop who can't hear a thing is deaf apprentice Otto Shima. The 17-year-old from Cottage Grove High school comes in three days a week to learn from Larry.

A blind fella teaching a deaf guy sounds like the start of an excellent joke, but the two mates work well together. J.J. Johansson, Otto's interpreter translates what Larry says to him and speaks Otto's reply.

Otto says he's inspired by Larry's never-give-up attitude and wants to start his own business one day. Larry's proud two guys with disabilities can make a go of it.

Outside of the garage, Larry was – and still is – get this, a racing car driver! He enters demolition derbies at the local track. A co-driver acts as his eyes and tells him where he's positioned, while Larry puts the pedal to the metal. He regularly finishes in the top half of the winner's list.

To Larry, it's all about getting on with life and reaching your potential. "You've got to make the best of what you can," he says. "Some people whine: 'Man, I've got to get up for work today.' I always feel, 'Wow, I get to go to work today.'"

"I have a 1968 El Camino I'm restoring. I updated the stereo in it, but I put it in upside down – and it still worked!"

One of the myths about going blind is your hearing improves. Larry says this isn't the case – you just learn to use it better. It helps him negotiate the office.

"A little while ago I was walking though the shop, and Mark was standing in front of the car. Just as I was getting to walk around behind him to get around the other side of the car, I could hear his feet shuffling and moving away to open up the front of the car for me to walk across.



» BLIND AMBITION

Larry used to race modified cars and can still do 80km/h on an oval track. His big goal is to break the blind land speed record (280km/h). He also says demolition derby driving (that's him in the clip) is great because he doesn't get sore anymore. "The co-pilot doesn't tell me if I'm about to crash and the next day I'm not sore. If you see you're going to get in a wreck, you tense up. But I wasn't because I didn't know when the impact was going to come."