

# AN ETERNAL BLINDFOLD

A Cottage Grove man sees past blindness to fulfill his dream of owning an automotive shop.

On Tuesday, April 16, 2002, at 6:45 a.m., auto mechanic Larry Woody left his home in Cottage Grove, Oregon, for his daily commute to nearby Eugene. While traveling north in his Toyota Celica, a southbound semi-truck lost control, barreling through the grassy center divider. The enormous truck veered toward the tiny car's path, crashing directly into its side and leaving the remnants of the Celica nearly unrecognizable.

The accident's severity caused Woody to undergo extensive surgery and left him with countless injuries, including complete, permanent blindness. Although Woody recovered from most of his injuries in less than a year, he's still faced with new challenges each day. But despite losing his eyesight, Woody hasn't lost his passion for family, community, and mechanics.

Woody has worked on cars since the late 1970s, but following the accident, he found it nearly impossible to find work as a mechanic. Instead Woody took on small projects and worked on cars in the shop at his house, soon realizing he still had the ability to continue his career as a successful mechanic.

Around that same time, local D&D Automotives was put up for sale, and Woody knew this was his chance to finally go back to work. So in 2006, Woody bought D&D Automotives in hopes of going back to professionally tinkering with cars and to accomplish his longtime goal of owning an automotive repair shop.

**BG:** Why own your own shop?

**LW:** Not many people wanted to hire a blind mechanic, service advisor, or shop manager. At 42 years old I was too young to retire and I tried staying at home while I was processing what I wanted to do. It just wasn't working for me sitting at home—everybody else I knew was at work. That was one of the hardest things on me because I had been working since I was 15, and it's not like I could sit and watch television all day. I had heard D&D Automotives was for sale, so I decided it was time to venture out and try mechanics on my own. I began speaking with the previous owner, worked out the details, and signed papers on June 30, 2006.

**BG:** What were some of the hardships you experienced in day-to-day life after your accident?

**LW:** Learning how to walk again; walking in the dark all the time; living in total darkness. It's an adjustment. To learn to use a cane, to feel your way through familiar surroundings, even. I had many people tell me right after I got out of the hospital, 'Oh, I understand what you're going through because I put a blindfold on last night and tried to walk through my house.' Well, that'll give them a feel for what I'm going through, but that won't totally give them an understanding, because at any time they can take that blindfold off. I can never take mine off.

**BG:** What was it like the first time you returned to working with cars?

**LW:** A family member had a little Honda four-wheeler for his grandkids and it was pretty much a basket case. He asked me if I wanted to take on

a project, and I said, 'What are we talking?' He told me and I said, 'All I can do is try.' So he brought it out and over a few weeks I got it put back together and running for him. It was a very rewarding feeling fixing cars as a blind person. From there, I just started doing little things on our cars at home and just kept growing into owning my own shop.

**BG:** How are you able to physically perform mechanics without the ability to see?

**LW:** It's being able to rely on your other senses more. I wouldn't say my hearing or other senses have gotten any better, but because I have to rely on them more, I'm more aware of those senses. Also in mechanics, most of our work is done by feel because we're not always able to see the parts we're working on due to their positioning.

Although I'd say I get around pretty well relying on my sense of feel, mishaps do happen. I once installed a car radio on my own and it was nearly perfect except one minor detail—it was installed upside down. Today's cars are also getting more and more complex, so although I do work on cars a little here and there, I now manage D&D more than I work on the cars that come in here.

**BG:** What do you enjoy most about your job?

**LW:** It's not a job—it's a hobby. It gets me out of the house and I've really enjoyed just visiting with the customers and being, as some people would say, 'plugged in' to the community. Most people get up in the morning and grumble, grumble, gripe, gripe. They think, 'I have to go to work today,' and there are those days where I don't want to get up and get moving—but I *get* to come to work every day.

**BG:** Do you believe everything happens for a reason? Why?

**LW:** I think so. It's just a feeling I have. In 1999, I was on a train from Portland to Seattle and the first person I noticed on the train was a blind man. I had never really observed a blind person before, but I was amazed watching him and I thought, 'Man that's got to be tough.'

Then in 2000, I was a chaperone for a Cottage Grove Middle School field trip and one of the kids on the trip was blind. At one point on the trip we went into an indoor gym, and I watched the boy put his cane down and run with the other kids on the track. That just blew me away; it was like, 'Wow, this is very impressive.'

About a year later, I got to know a customer where I worked who was an orientation mobility instructor for blind people. Little did I know, a year later he would come out of retirement to be my instructor. Then after my accident I had the opportunity to mentor and teach mechanics to a deaf student. So, with that in mind yeah, things happen for a reason.

**BG:** If you could give people with disabilities or other challenges some words of advice, what would they be?

**LW:** Life is a choice. If you've got a dream and you've got something you want to try to do, then do it—no matter what your disability is—because you'll never get a chance to do it if you don't. ☐

- BRONWYN GIBSON



Larry Woody, owner of D&D Automotive in Cottage Grove, Oregon, stands behind the counter at his shop. This is one of the few places Woody says he feels comfortable walking without his cane.



Tools of the trade Woody used to repairs cars before and after his accident.



D&D is littered with trays of tools and lubricants that mechanics use to fix any problem they may encounter.

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