

OLD CARS, NEW LIFE AT REINCARNATION

Owner's take is opposite of industry's reputation

BY BILL REED
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Jim Verhey makes a living off guys reliving their youth, guys who ask him to turn their dreams and memories into beautifully restored metal and paint.

Verhey strolls through his shop, Reincarnation Auto, winding his way through an orange '72 Chevy Super Sport, a '52 Mercedes with wood in the frame, and a '51 Chevy truck that's being turned into a dream machine for a cross-country journey.

Then there's his pet project, a '56 Chevy Bel Air two-door hard top that looks just like the car his dad drove home a



A 1970 Plymouth Superbird at Reincarnation Auto. Customers are regularly updated on the work on their cars.

half-century ago.

"I've never forgotten that car," Verhey, 59, said.

"They want the car they rode around in the passenger seat of," said Winston Verhey, 22, who works for his dad, "and that's what we help them get back to."

Verhey's shop is remarkably clean and orderly, and there's a designated spot inside the toolbox drawers for every single wrench, hammer and screwdriver.

Verhey is the first to admit that he's anal. He's changed the old saying to, "Anything worth doing is worth overdoing."

He also acknowledges that his industry — vintage automobile restoration — has the opposite reputation. Some shops keep cars for years, charge thousands of dollars, and never seem to get the work done, he said.

He keeps a lawyer's business card handy in his shop for customers who have been burned.

So perhaps it shouldn't be a

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PHOTOS BY KIRK SPEER, THE GAZETTE
Jim Verhey, the owner of Reincarnation Auto, worked on his personal project, a 1956 Chevy Bel Air, at his workshop on Aug. 11.

VERHEY: Photos track work

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surprise that he's found a way to keep his once-bitten-twice-shy customers updated on the work on their cars.

Question: You assign a digital camera to each mechanic, and send a photo album to each customer at noon and 4:30 p.m. each day. Why go to all that trouble?

Answer: We send them pictures of exactly what we're doing that day, and the pictures always have captions. Look, if you're building a house, you go see it after work every day. It's the same in the auto business. You should know how your money is being spent. They think, "Geez, is the guy working on my car or not? Am I putting my money in a black hole?"

The customers love it and I do, too. We're proud of our work and we want people to know how and what we're doing to their car.

Q: Why do you keep a half-finished car in front of your shop?



KIRK SPEER, THE GAZETTE

The Reincarnation 50/50 Chevy is a marketing tool, with half the car restored to its glory, and the other half showing all the rust and problem spots of age.

A: We call that (old Chevy) the 50/50 car. We did only the driver's side — rust holes, interior reupholstered, windows, dash — and left the passenger side like we found it. On that side it looks like hell, and that's exactly what we wanted. People always say, "That piece of crap in my backyard could never look that good." The 50/50 car is our best marketing tool,

because it proves that it can (look that good).

Q: How long have you been working on cars?

A: I built my first car, a dune buggy, when I was 15 years old. By the time I graduated high school in 1968 I had fixed up 289 cars. I obviously had the bug. It was hopeless.

Questions and answers are edited for space and clarity.