

CLASSY TOUCH

GIVING OLD CARS A SECOND LOOK



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Greg Kalmes, owner of St. Donatus Body & Paint Shop, and his trusted friend Shelby pose proudly next to his son's 1970 Cougar Eliminator, which he gave as a wedding gift.

Fixing up the best

These classics get a lot
of tender, loving care

By Rachel Gull/Telegraph Herald/Photos by Mike Burley

A 1968 Camaro and a 1956 Ford Thunderbird.

A 1969 Dodge Super Bee, a 1965 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud III and a 1971 Ford Torino.

A 1970 Ford Torino GT and a 1967 Shelby GT500.

"Nothing in here is newer than 40 years old," Greg Kalmes said, gesturing around the St. Donatus Body & Paint Shop.

A St. Donatus, Iowa, native, Kalmes, 54, walks to the shop every morning with his yellow lab, Shelby. The dog was named after his wife Jeanie's car, a '66 Shelby Mustang convertible that the couple restored together and recently sold to a man in Zurich, Switzerland.

Just a few hours away in Holland is another Mustang Kalmes restored.

Though many of his customers are from the tri-state area, "I get cars from pretty far away sometimes," Kalmes said. "It's all word of mouth. It pretty much always has been."

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"They know that when they come here they are going to get a good quality job," Kalmes said. "You can get cars done cheaper, but not better. We're very passionate about high-quality work. ... It's not unusual to spend 1,000 hours on a car."

The shop's invitation-only spring party draws about 400 people — and their cars.

"There are several million dollars worth of cars here that day," Kalmes said.

OTHER JOBS

Classic cars aren't Kalmes' only focus.

When a friend in San Francisco was restoring a '57 BMW motorcycle, "he mailed it to me in a big box — fenders, gas tank, oil tank, headlight covers. He kept the frame and did it himself, but the good stuff he sent to me."

He's also done work on boats, airplanes, tricycles, wagons, antique tractors and a '59 Amphicar — an amphibious car.

"It's to the point where he isn't afraid. He has never been apprehensive about doing a job. If a customer wants it done, he can do it," Jeanie, 53, said. ... "(He's done) Fiats to Fords to Ferraris and everything in between," Jeanie said.

"It would be easier to list the cars I haven't worked on," Kalmes said.

Kalmes does a lot of research — both online and in books.

"Sometimes there's an owner's manual with the car that tells how to take it apart," Jeanie said. But most of the time, they are on their own, using a digital camera to take photos as they disassemble the car so they have a reference when putting it back together.

"We bag and tag all the parts — where it came from on the car and what it's for," Jeanie said. "We make sure to make detailed notes. You can't just have a bag of parts that says 'front end.'"

IN SHOP

• Sitting in the back of the shop is a '65 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud III, imported from England in the late 1970s. In storage for more than 30 years, the car was completely disassembled when the owner brought it to Kalmes.

"All the trim was off. The paint was off. It was in boxes and cups and bags with no assembly manual," Jeanie said.

Today, the car gleams like the day it was made with only some upholstery work left.



A 1965 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud III is one of the many classic cars worked on at St. Donatus Body & Paint.

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The 1956 Ford Thunderbird has a distinctive tail light.

NOT ALL OF THE CARS LEAVE THE SHOP

"We own several classic cars in various stages of repair," Greg Kalmes said. "It's just as big a part of our personal life as our business."

Personal cars

'50 Chevy Suburban

'65 Mustang Fastback

'31 Model A

'70 Mach I

'72 Mustang Spirit

"I like them just as much as he does," wife Jeanie said.

- On its side is a 1970 Ford Torino GT.

"This is the car this guy has had since high school. He's kept it for 30 years," Kalmes said.

Kalmes explained that the man could buy a car like this for less money than restoration would cost, but that the emotional significance made it worthwhile. That, he said, is his favorite part of his job.

"I can take a car that some consider ready for the junk yard, and I can make it totally usable. It's a sense of saving something for history. Not everybody can do it. There's a sense of satisfaction that I can do something most guys just shake their heads at."

- "This is the correct color of blue for the body," Kalmes said, pointing at a recent paint job on a '69 Dodge Super Bee. "A lot of cars get modifications over the years — a color change, wider wheels or tires. This car is 100 percent stock. It's all original — engine, tranny. ... It's worthwhile to make it stock and not hurt the value of it."

- A '68 Camaro had floorboards so rusted that employee Ron Keehn could stick his foot through them.

"We specialize in invisible repair," Kalmes said. "When we're done, you can't tell work was done to it."

The shop will replace the floorboards and perform "major rust repair to make the car safe to drive."

The client will take the car home and continue with repairs as he is able.

"Most cars are done in stages — \$5,000 here, \$5,000 there," Kalmes said. "Most of the cars I do are for regular blue collar guys."

TECHNIQUES/ PAINTS

"Everything is modern — the techniques, the types of paint," Kalmes said. Modern paints are more durable, so he uses them even on classic cars. But on a rare occasion, he's asked to revert to lacquer and enamel paints.

A man from Waterloo, Iowa, brought in a rare '57 Corvette race car and insisted on the older paints.

"I hadn't painted that way in years," Kalmes said. "But the car was so rare, so valuable, that he insisted."

Built by the factory for racing, the car has no heater or radio. It has a convertible mechanism but no top.

"It's like a stripped-down car, but it was built that way," Kalmes said. The factory added bigger brakes, and "they used wheels from the factory that were normally used on ambulances or taxicabs so it would handle better."

"There are only 25 left in the world, and his car is spot-on correct, including the paint."

QUALITY

"I've devoted my life to doing really high-quality work. We don't repair cars. We restore them. Even if it's not a whole nut and bolt job, we never do anything twice."

He pointed to a photo on the wall of a '68 Torino.

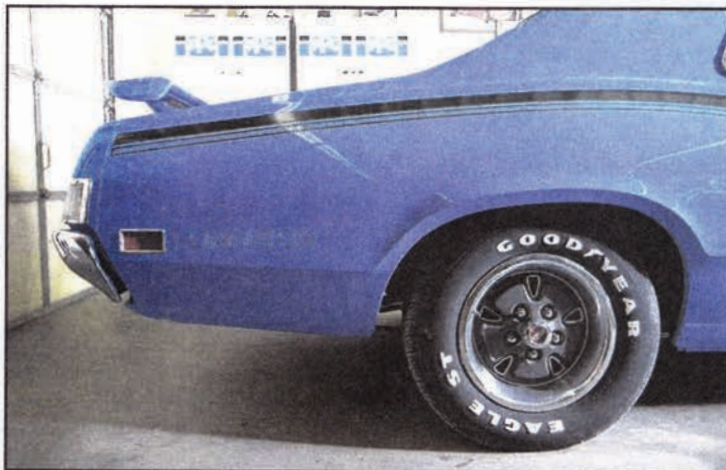
"I painted that 17 years ago. ... Today it still looks like the day we painted it."

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The distinctive front of the 1970 Cougar Eliminator, which Kalmes gave as a wedding gift.



The engine of a '71 Ford Torino 500 begs for attention at St. Donatus Body & Paint Shop. Owner Greg Kalmes can spend up to 1,000 hours working on classic cars to get them to look new.



A detail of the 1970 Cougar Eliminator shows off the sleek back end.