

INNERVIEWS "IT'S THE BEST JOB I'VE EVER HAD"

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He retired after 33 years as a junior high shop teacher, but he wanted to stay busy. Fortunately, he found the perfect job. What would you expect with a name like Bill Fortune?

An inveterate car freak with a penchant for Pontiacs, he works for the Good News Mountaineer Garage, a charitable program that gives donated vehicles to people needing transportation for work.

Along with collecting and evaluating cars for the garage, he's gearing up for the 30th annual Pontiac Oakland Club International Convention opening here July 9. He single-handedly lured the convention to Charleston. Pontiac aficionados and their families will bring 3,000 visitors to town, not to mention a parade of vintage Pontiacs.

He can hardly wait. At 58, that boyhood passion for cars hasn't faded.

"I was born in Logan, but we moved to St. Albans when I was an infant. My dad had a motel in St. Albans. He had all kinds of businesses. He had a hotel in Charleston at one time, the Broad Street Hotel. It catered to railroad workers. His rooms were like 25 cents a night. You could stay all week for a dollar.

"The first instance I recall about cars was in 1948. I was 4, and I saw a truck carrying new 1949 Fords up Route 60 in St. Albans. I thought that was the greatest thing. They had changed them completely, and that caught my eye.

"The first car I remember riding in was my dad's 1946 Packard. It was a pretty swanky thing. My dad was not a mechanical person, but my uncle was. He was a C&O Railroad engineer. We grew up right in front of the tracks. He would stop the steam engine, and I would get on that thing. I guess that's the mechanical junk I got into right there.

"When I was about 12, I bought a motor at a junkyard because I wanted to see what was inside that made that thing go. The junkyard was about a half mile from our home. I took a wheelbarrow and hauled the engine back a piece at a time. I worked for days hauling that thing. I've often wondered how I got that big block part home. My dad or somebody must have hauled that for me in a truck.

"Right after that, I bought a 1939 Ford that I had to tow home with a rope. It cost \$50. I tore it apart to see what it was made of. Then I bought a 1927 Ford for \$15, just an old drag car, a body and frame. I put the Oldsmobile motor I got from the junkyard into the Ford and put in a Cadillac transmission. I never did get it running.

"I was a teen-ager by then and wanted a car I could run around in. I overhauled my dad's car, a 1953 Chevy. Me and my wife dated in that car. She has tolerated my car stuff all my life. Her mom told her it was better than me running around in poolrooms. At least she knew I was out in the garage.

"My sister had a 1955 Chevrolet she bought new. When she married and left home, that was left to me. I finished up my senior year with that. It ended up with a Pontiac motor in it. I got into Pontiac stuff early on. It wasn't a very popular vehicle. Nobody had them, and I wanted to be different.

"Hot Rod magazines are my thing. The first one I bought was in February 1958. I still have it. The magazine started in 1948, and I've got just about all those on up to the present day.

"I went to West Virginia State College. I liked mechanical things, so I became a shop teacher. I went to work at Nitro Junior High in 1966 and was there until 1999, most of it in the same room.

"When I retired, they closed down my shop. That's happening in a lot of schools. There's not anybody to replace the guys who did that type thing. Now it's technology-based, but I think the pendulum will swing back. We don't have craftsmen and mechanics and people to work on our stuff anymore, and we will need that.

"After I retired, I needed something to do. I substituted for a year or two. And then I saw an ad in the paper about the Good News Garage. I told my wife they had written the job for me. They wanted someone mechanically inclined with automotive experience who wanted to help the less fortunate.

"I had never heard of the Good News Garage. It started about 1996 in Vermont. A fellow came up with the idea, through the Lutheran Church, to help people get reliable transportation to get to work. The program took off and our local group decided to give it a shot.

"It started about May of last year, and I came on in June. We were going full guns in December when I had open-heart surgery. Two or three weeks before, I probably towed seven cars in one day. And I got a wakeup call. Now I'm working about 25 hours a week.

"It's the best job I've ever had. I can't believe they are paying me to have this much fun. When people call in about a car they want to get rid of, I look the car over to see if it meets our criteria, if we can repair it economically, anything it needs to pass the state inspection. We like to have it reliable enough so they can get maybe two years of use out of it without major repairs.

"We get our referrals from [state] caseworkers. It's fun to see smiley faces when you give someone a car. I like to help people. I do a lot of volunteer church work.

"Here's a Mercedes someone brought in. We've got two others. Anything that's high maintenance, we'd be foolish to give to a person coming off welfare. Operating it would break them up. So we sell those and put the money back into the program.

"Some of the people who donate their cars cry when they bring them in. The kids will wave goodbye. The car is like a member of the family. We got a car from Charlottesville, the people had named it Ed. It came with a full maintenance record, anything that was ever done to Ed. I just gave Ed away last week. Ed is in the hands of a nice Kanawha County person.

"There are a lot of memories in a car. That's what drives the whole old car hobby. People will restore a car they had in high school, trying to bring back the good old days.

"I've been with the Pontiac Oakland Club International for 15 years. We are the oldest Pontiac enthusiasts group in the world. There are 11,000 of us. I'm on the national board. Every year, we have a convention. We've had them in Buffalo, Denver, New Hampshire, several places in Ohio, Grand Rapids, and last year, up near St. Paul.

"I sell Pontiac parts, a little sideline, so my wife and I go to the convention every year. Coming home, we would discuss that convention and how we could have done this and that better. We came to the conclusion that Charleston has as good or better facilities as any convention city we've ever been in. We finally decided that yes, we could do it.

"We've got Tony Stewart coming in. He does five personal appearances a year for the Pontiac Motor Division, and we were lucky enough to get one of them. We expect about 1,200 entries, and each one represents a family, so we're talking 3,000 to 4,000 people coming in.

"There will be a few of the early Oaklands here. General Motors started producing Oaklands in 1909. They decided they needed a less expensive car, so they started the Pontiac. In 1932, when the Depression hit, Pontiac stayed and the Oakland passed away.

"We're trying to put as much local culture into the convention as we can. We've got a tour scheduled to Nitro to my church, St. Paul's United Methodist. The men of the church are cooking a traditional West Virginia breakfast with biscuits and gravy.

"I don't think I'm ever going to retire. I like to stay busy. I have a granddaughter to stay busy with, too. She came from Russia. I went with her mom and dad to pick her up. I saw two Pontiacs in Russia, right on the streets of Moscow, and I thought, 'All right!'"

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