

## The Life of a Mechanic

Performance Transmission is located near Centerville, Wisconsin, alongside highway 35/53. The large, brown sided building is set off from and angled slightly from the road behind a neighboring house. Most of the land around the shop is corn fields. I turn into the gravel driveway and see about twenty vehicles parked in the front lot of the one year old business.

As I walk into the building, I enter a large shop area with two bays that have hoists for vehicles and another bay filled with parts and boxes. There is a bench in the back corner full of parts and tools. By the bench there are two large tool boxes, and every drawer is full of a variety of tools and organized a particular way. I walk up to a counter not far from the entrance and take a seat on one of the black bar stools. There are numerous cans of peanuts and candy on the counter, along with parts books, telephone books, and notepads on the counter and behind it is the door to the employee's bathroom, a small bathroom with a corner sink and vanity, a toilet, a small closet, and a stand up shower.

As I sit at the counter, I look directly to my right and notice two doors that lead into a large room. The floor is black and white checkered with a large red diamond in the middle with two checkered race flags inside of it. There is a large TV on one side of the room, and two dark grey couches are placed along the opposite wall. There are many Dale Earnhardt and NASCAR pictures hung on the white walls, and there are two display cases full of race cars which, of course, consist of mainly Dale Earnhardt cars. There are two offices to the back of the "TV room" of the shop. The office on the left is my dad's: the desk full of papers, invoices, notes, books, and bills. The office on the right is my grandpa's; his desk top is covered with a train clock, coffee pot and mugs, and a plaque of Dale Earnhardt. There is also a door to the left of my dad's office, the customer's bathroom, which is much bigger to be handicap accessible. Unlike the employee's bathroom, this bathroom only has a toilet, a sink and a mirror. The shop overall—even though it is a place where grease, dirt, and oil are present daily—is a very clean and modern building.

Almost immediately after I sit down at the counter my grandpa—a short, practically bald, pear shaped man also known as "the foreman"—spots me and walks from the office and TV room side of the building into the shop area by me. He always greets everyone who walks into the shop first, mainly because my dad and his employee Derek are the ones who do the work there.

Derek, who is a blue eyed and brown haired man in his twenties, says hi to me after he finishes unscrewing a bolt from underneath the blue Dodge truck on the hoist. My dad—a tall, thin, brown

haired man—says hi a few minutes later after he finishes with one size wrench, cleans it off with a shop rag, and walks out from underneath the truck to get different size wrench. This is how my dad and Derek treat family and friends while they're working. I begin to tell Derek about how my snowmobile speech went in CST earlier in the day, but am constantly interrupted by talk between him and my dad.

“Hey, am I going to need the flare wrench for this?” Derek asks my dad after poking his head out from underneath the Dodge truck.

“Yeah, I think you're gonna need it,” my dad replies back, without even looking away from the small part of the Dodge truck he was working on at the bench.

I restart my snowmobile speech story a number of times, but eventually I give up and just watch.

“Can you hand me that pipe wrench on my cart over there, Nikki?” Derek asks. I stare at him with a look of complete confusion, as if he had just spoken a different language to me. He realizes that I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about and retrieves the tool himself.

Suddenly, a customer—a short, thin man with dirty work clothes and work boots—walks into the shop and up to the counter. Unlike when family and friends stop at the shop, customers are treated a little differently. After only a few seconds, my grandpa introduces himself and begins to find out the name, address, and information about what the customer's needs repaired. After a couple of minutes, my dad looks up from his bench and realizes a customer is there. He immediately stops what he's doing and walks over to the man. My dad speaks very friendly with the customer and is very clear when he gives the man an estimate for the repair of his vehicle. My dad treats customers differently than family and friends because he needs customers to come back and bring more work for him. Family and friends can be customers too, but for the most part are treated much differently.

The daily activities at the shop depend on who you are. Derek says he usually takes the transmissions out of the vehicles, while my dad usually rebuilds them. Since Derek is the one who usually takes out the transmissions, he usually ends up being the dirtiest by the end of the day. He works under all the vehicles, so dirt, oil, and grease usually end up on his face, clothes, and hands. But he doesn't mind getting dirty. He says that if he's not dirty, he's not working hard enough. My dad usually stays pretty clean, since he doesn't have to work underneath the vehicles. But occasionally he will get just as filthy as Derek, and he doesn't really mind it either. The foreman, my grandpa, has a little different job than my dad and Derek. He is the one who watches divorce court pretty much all day, of course, when he's not greeting the customers that come in. He is the one who makes lunch or

runs out to pick up the lunch order at one of the businesses that serve food close by. My grandpa's only physical job at the shop is mopping the floor, which he does at least twice a week.

Lunch time rolls around, so my grandpa takes out the Presto pizza maker, makes a deluxe pizza, and brings out Cheetos and Doritos nacho cheese chips. When the pizza is done, my grandpa takes his share, leaves the rest on the counter in the shop area, and goes into the other room to watch divorce court while he enjoys his lunch. About fifteen or twenty minutes later when the food is cold, Derek and my dad finally stop working and come over to eat. They eat in silence, their hands and faces filthy with dirt, oil, and grease. I don't understand how they could touch their food with such disgusting hands and still eat it.

After a lunch that made me sick to my stomach, I begin to ask Derek about the tools he uses at work. He shows me rows of wrenches of all different sizes, including a pipe wrench and a flare wrench. He also shows me a drawer full of a variety of sizes and shapes of screw drivers. I observe a bunch of sockets, including a special one called a torx socket. He only shows me a few of the main tools he used because it would take all day to show all the tools in the shop. Tools not only seem to be very important in a mechanic's ability to do a job, but also very expensive. Roy Cullen (2001), who is affiliated to the Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Finance, described a survey by the Canadian Automotive Repairs and Service Council given to automotive technicians. This survey found that half of the mechanics surveyed owned about \$20,000 worth of tools, while about a third of them said they owned more than \$30,000 worth of tools. That is a lot of money, and a lot of tools! I ask my dad how much money he had invested in tools; he simply says, "Way more than \$30,000, Nik."

Even though tools seem to be a mechanic's best friend, parts are also just as important. "Is the converter here for the tranny of that red Ford yet?" my dad asks Derek, his eyes intently focused on a tranny he's working on at his bench.

"No, but it *was* supposed to come today," Derek answers back, still working underneath the blue Dodge truck on the hoist.

"Well, I guess we can't finish it today. Jeez, we've had that one for a couple of weeks already, and I would really have liked to get that one out today," my dad replies in disgust.

Almost immediately after the word "today" left my dad's mouth, a red semi with a white trailer pulls into the driveway, and a huge smile stretches across my dad's face.

"Good. The converter is finally here," my dad said with a sigh a relief, putting down the tool he was working with to greet the delivery man with the converters.

Derek tells me that parts are so important because if they don't get them in on time, they can't finish the job on time. If they don't finish jobs on time, then they don't get paid on time, which can be a problem when it comes to writing paychecks and paying bills.

It's around three o'clock in the afternoon, and my dad encounters a problem.

"Gary hasn't come to pay his bill yet, has he?" my dad asks Derek as he quickly walks to the phone to make a call.

"No, he hasn't showed up yet. Isn't this the second time he said he was going to come and pay?" Derek questions back, without looking over, as he finishes screwing the last screw underneath the Dodge truck.

Gary Smith, a recent customer of my dad's, said he would come in around 8:30 in the morning, and it's now late in the afternoon.

"I hope we don't have *another* customer that I have to hound to get my money," my dad utters as he dials the phone.

My dad tells me about some of the other customers that have failed to pay him. Some of them he just had to continually call and remind them until they paid in full. But he did tell me about one customer, a mailman, that he actually had to send an official letter; it said if he didn't pay by a certain date, my dad would be forced to take him to court. The mailman did eventually pay, but my dad said he learned his lesson: don't let the vehicle leave the shop *unless* it's paid for. But now my dad is in the same dilemma again. I ask my dad why he let this Gary guy take his car before it was paid and he told me sarcastically as he grinned at Derek, "Because Derek made me."

"Yeah, yeah," Derek chuckled and replied back as he lowered the hoist with the Dodge truck on it.

"Hey Nikki, do you wanna go for a test ride with me?" Derek asks as he puts away some wrenches he was using for the Dodge.

I tell him I'll go, so Derek opens the garage door and we hop in the blue Dodge. Derek starts the truck, turns the radio off, and we head out towards the highway. As we travel down the road, Derek feels and listens for each shift of the truck, to make sure they are all right.

After a few miles Derek smiles and exclaims happily, "We must have done something right, cuz she runs awesome now!"

When we get back to the shop, Derek drives the truck back into the shop. I jump out and take a seat at the counter while Derek pops the hood to check the transmission fluid.

“Nikki, would you get one of the notepads on the counter for me?” Derek asks me as he wipes off the dipstick before he puts it back in to check the level of the fluid. I say sure I will, but I ask why he needs it.

“Every time we finish a vehicle, I have to write down the VIN number, the year, and the number of miles so your dad can have it on record for the warranty he gives each customer,” Derek explains to me as he is shutting the hood of the Dodge.

I reach over the counter, grab the notepad, and bring it over to Derek. He lets me write down the information for my dad, and I take it to my dad’s desk in his office so he has it when he needs to write up the bill for the vehicle.

After the vehicle is finished, Derek drives it out of the shop and parks it in the lot. He jumps into an old, red Ford truck, starts it up, and drives it in the bay that the Dodge was in before.

When Derek parks the Ford, he gets out, fixes the hoist underneath the truck, and raises the hoist and truck about five feet in the air. I ask him what he’s doing now and he, while grabbing a wrench from the tool chest, replies, “Doing what I do most of the time...I either take trannys in or out, and this time I happen to be taking one out.”

While Derek works on taking a transmission out, my dad continues to rebuild a transmission for a Durango that he started just after lunch. I walk over to the bench and ask him how he’s doing. He looks at me, exhausted, and says, “This one is kicking my ass.”

I laugh and tell him not to worry because it’s almost time to go. He smiles back at me and continues to work on the transmission, placing metal rings with teeth—clutches—carefully back into it.

Derek and my dad work on their jobs non-stop with little talking. Five o’clock finally rolls around, so I tell them it’s time to go.

“Yup, I’ll wash up right after I finish this last thing,” Derek replies as he continues to work underneath the Ford.

My grandpa walks out about a minute after five, waves, says goodbye and heads out to his vehicle.

My dad, who heard me say it was five, actually listens to me and goes over to the sink in the back to wash up. He pushes on the soap dispenser that dispenses orange soap with little scrubbing balls in it and cleans his hands and forearms intensely to make sure there isn’t a speck of dirt or grease left on them. After he dries his hands and forearms off, he walks through the TV room and into his office to get his box, a small cardboard box full of bills, checks, money, and other important documents he doesn’t want to leave at the shop. I have no idea why he doesn’t use the briefcase he has

stuffed at home in his closet; instead, he chooses to use an old cardboard box to keep his important things.

About fifteen minutes later, Derek finally finishes his work on the Ford. He puts his tools away after he wipes them off with a red shop rag and walks over to the sink to wash up. He washes his hands very similar to my dad, except after an examination I find that his hands—his fingernails in particular—still have some dirt on them. He just laughs at me and says that I am too critical.

When Derek is finally finished washing his hands, I ask him why he didn't stop at five when he is supposed to be done. As he dried his hands, he replies, "Because in this job, you hardly ever finish at five...there is always one last, quick job you can do before you leave. And, well, because of that, I never leave till after five."

Derek and my dad are finally ready to leave. They talk a few minutes about tomorrow's jobs.

"So you'll finish taking out that Ford tomorrow, and then when you're done with that you can put the one on the bench back in that Durango, because I'll be finished with that by the time you're ready for it," my dad tells Derek as they are walking towards the door.

"Sounds like a plan," Derek replies back as they split up and head towards their own vehicles to head home.

I can't imagine how my dad and Derek aren't exhausted from the day's work, because I think I'm ready for a nap and I was only watching them. They spend the whole day on their feet and are constantly using their hands. Derek spends most of the day with his hands above his head; I try to keep my hands above my head, but fail after only a few minutes.

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The three major factors involved in mechanic's work are tools and parts, time, and cleanliness. Without tools, my dad and Derek wouldn't be able to repair any vehicles. Car parts, which are just as important as tools, are like ingredients to a chef; if the chef doesn't have the right ingredients, then he can't make the meal that he needs to. The professional chef also has tools that he uses to create masterpieces from his ingredients. A professional chef has more specialties than your ordinary chef. This is like comparing my dad and Derek, who are transmission specialists, to your average automotive mechanic. They have more skills and knowledge than a normal mechanic because transmission skills are a "specialty" in the mechanic world.

Time, along with tools and parts, also seems to be important in mechanic work. Jobs need to be finished on time to keep customers happy, keeping the relationship between my dad and his customers on good terms. This also helps my dad keep up with the jobs he takes, so he doesn't get

behind and have too much work and too little time. Time probably affects most—if not all—jobs, but it is really important in mechanic's work.

Self cleanliness isn't a major priority during the working hours of a mechanic. On the other hand, tool and space cleanliness is a major priority during the day. This is why Derek and my dad wipe off their tools every time they are done using them and why my Grandpa mops the floor so often. The reason for tool and space cleanliness is to keep the shop looking respectable since customers see the shop area when they come in.

When it comes to loving their job, Derek and my dad and even my grandpa admit they do. They tell me that it's fun because everyday is different and you get to help people with their problems—well their car problems anyway. And they're not the only mechanics who say this. Francine Knowles (2004), author of an article series about hot jobs in the Chicago Sun-Times, interviews a twenty-two-year-old mechanic named Christopher Enright. He states in his interview that one reward about being a mechanic is being able to fix something and making customers feel better. So even though many people think mechanic's work is dirty, it is still a rewarding job that many people enjoy because they help others. Derek and my dad will agree that the work can be dirty, but the reward outweighs any disadvantages that come with being a mechanic.

## **References**

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