

Couple Shares Passion for Past, Street Rods

by K_Guice

Lou & Gayle Najera share a special passion. Something that not all couples share. It is a love for street rods.

Lou, a retired police officer and Gayle, who works at the Bend Chamber of Commerce are bound by their love for one another, but they are also have a great desire for their fully-restored 1941 Studebaker and their nearly restored 1956 Chevy Nomad.

The two found their first big project car about 10 years ago. "We found it in a barn in Tumalo, in a big red barn," he said. "It was a barn car. It had rats living in it, the fenders were all banged up, the roof was caved in and the interior was shredded."

The couple paid about \$1,400 for the vintage Studebaker and the labor of love began. It took four years and about \$24,000 to restore it.

"The fun is in building it. I did most of it with the exception of the paint, the upholstery and the glass," Lou said. "You can do almost all of that in your garage."

So, what did Gayle do? “She came out and took pictures,” Lou joked. In all honesty, he says she was very supportive and is key to all of the planning the couple does with their classic cars.

“I supported it completely,” she said. “I loved the fact that he got passionate about something and this was something that we could both do.”

Gayle says she has a sense of pride when they get in their old car and drive it down the street. “Oh it is fun. You feel really special,” she said.

Lou agrees. Over the years, their Studebaker has brought home many trophies. “It’s not really about the trophy,” he said. “If we win, we win. If we don’t, we don’t; but you feel good when your own peers think your car is worthy of a trophy.”

The best trophy he says they have received was from a Studebaker Club meet up about five or six years ago. "It's the smallest trophy of the bunch, but the one we like the best."

Currently, Lou has his hands full trying to finish his '56 Nomad. "It's at the upholstery shop." He hopes it will be done in time for a car event coming up in Bend.

"I bought this one partially complete and redid it," he said. Unlike his barnyard find, the Nomad cost ten times more and gave him twice as much trouble.

His initial investment was \$18,000. Over the past three years he has put in a lot of time, torque and about \$27,000.

That may sound like a lot but Lou says you can't put a price on it; you have to look at what the market can bear.

“Right now it is a good market and it fluctuates,” he said. “It’s hard to find these cars, so they are running in the 60, 70, 80 and even \$90,000 range when they are complete.

For Lou and Gayle, this is more than just a hobby; it is a big part of their life. “It’s not something that you just do,” Lou said. “I’ve been looking and drooling over cars since I was 12 years old. I have always had a love for cars no matter what they are,” he added.

In addition to fulfilling that love, Gayle says it has allowed them opportunities to travel to places they wouldn’t have otherwise gone.

More importantly the couple gets to be together. “Spending some quality time on a joint effort has been so wonderful,” she said. “This is the one thing that we do together and I think that is important.”

“Some fly airplanes, some like to race boats, we like to build and to drive cars,” Lou said. “I think it’s important that a couple have a common focus,” Gayle said.

In addition to bringing them closer together, she says it actually has helped them expand their network of friends. Lou agrees. It comes down to two things, the cars and the camaraderie.

“We go to these shows and people are paired up, playing cards, drinking sodas and going around oohing and ahing over each others cars,” Lou said. “It’s like one big family.”

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