Legally Blind Melbourne Man Excels at Rebuilding Antique Autos

by Chris Kridler

From the Editor: The following online story about Federationist Joe Naulty appeared on the Internet on January 5, 2011, in the publication, Florida Today. Joe is a past president of the NFB’s Deaf Blind Division and is currently president of the CARS (Classics, Antiques, and Rods, or Special Vehicles) Division. Here is the article:

Joseph Naulty has been a lot of things--the owner of a manufacturing business, a governor's appointee, an inspirational speaker, and a lip-synching, guitar-playing cowboy with a Melbourne Elks Lodge entertainment group. But Naulty, seventy-six, may be first and foremost a wizard with cars. Legally blind, he has just two degrees of vision in one eye, the result of deteriorating sight after an accident when he was fourteen.

He is restoring his twenty-sixth Model A in the garage of the Melbourne home he shares with his wife Arlene and is president of the CARS Division of the National Federation of the Blind. He's planning an Orlando car show in July. "This car did not exist," Naulty says as he points out the bright red 1931 truck's different parts. "A lot of times I buy cars and take them apart and put them together. This car, I bought pieces and put it together."

The fenders, the lights, the gas tank all had to be restored before he assembled them. He has help with painting, but he finished and installed a beautiful wood lining in the truck's bed by himself. "I Braille all the parts," he says as he touches and identifies them. He does the same with a table full of tools.

Naulty is already thinking about his next car, but it's clear he loves the one he's with. "The Model A was simplicity," he says, noting that many of the parts are new, manufactured by specialty vendors. "Model A's are very sought after by the older generation." It still needs work on the seat, and, even though the cloth top fits, he'd like to get a more authentic one.

"I've got a good $20,000 in this vehicle. You wanna buy it?" he asks with a laugh. He'd like to pay off a hefty credit card bill. Naulty says he's lost money in real estate and spent a fortune on one of his three grown sons' medical bills. He used to have a thirty-six-foot boat and fifteen antique cars. "Life is full of ambitions, direction. You go up, you come down, and I'm going back up again," Naulty says.

He gets help about once a week from representatives of a state program that aids disabled people starting their own businesses. "It's such an inspirational thing," says Jason Jones, who works on Naulty's behalf for the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, "just getting to know Joe for a year and hearing all the things that he's gone through and continues to go through, but he doesn't stop." The program aims to help Naulty do more inspirational speaking and write a book about his life, partly with new equipment that allows him to dictate to a computer. With another machine Naulty can use his limited vision to read greatly enlarged type on a screen. That's how he reads all the paperwork for his governor-appointed post on the state Board of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology. "He's so inspirational to us and to other people," says Ron Bowen, who works with Jones. "How can you not be encouraged to do better in your life?" he adds. "You don't see us helping. We don't touch anything. He does everything by himself."

Naulty can't drive the cars he so lovingly restores, except for in and out of the garage. He isn't sad about that, and he has a message for others with disabilities. "Do something with your life," he says. "Don't sit in the corner. Don't cry. Don't rot. Nobody wants to hear it. So maybe you can go to school. For God's sake, try to get a college education if you can today, or take up some vocational skill."

Naulty's wife Arlene says being married to Joe has given her opportunities she never would have had if she weren't so involved in his life and business. "I got to drive a truck. I got to experience all the male chauvinism. I got to learn things," she says.

Naulty talks about starting up a manufacturing company again and developing an energy-generating wind machine he designed. His wife calls him "tenacious and a dreamer, and there's nothing wrong with that. Many things have come from dreams."