

His hearse always draws a crowd

By Bruce Coburn

My favorite car is a 1974 Cadillac S&S Victoria hearse because I've always had a desire to own something as unique and colorful as a hearse.

Most people see me driving a hearse and get the wrong impression of me. They think I'm morbid, but that's not true at all. I lived near a funeral home when I was a child and there was a lot of mystery surrounding the hearse.

I was curious as to why they would have such an expensive vehicle to transport somebody to the cemetery. I was very inquisitive and my parents never answered a lot questions surrounding loss and dealing with death.

I take my car to shows and a lot of people stop and look. They like to look inside it; it's a curiosity more than anything else. Kids are really struck by it. They'll look inside and ask, "Is there anybody dead in there?"

I answer questions to the best of my ability and try not to say anything that's going to scare a child. I explain to them that it's just a car used to transport somebody to the cemetery.

My car was actually in service until a few years ago. It was sold on consignment to a dealership in the eastern part of Tennessee, which is where I bought it. I bought it strictly as a show car, because of the type of car it is and the number of them that were made. It's an unusual vehicle and that's all there is to it.

I test drove several hearses in Tennessee and I thought that my car was the most comfortable and roadworthy. I drove it on the highway and I liked the way it handled. I had no idea I'd be buying one when I went to Tennessee, but it handled very well on the road and when I drive it on the highway, I have to watch my speed because it definitely books out.

I haven't done anything more than just general maintenance on my car. When I bought it, the car was completely white. The top was destroyed and needed repairing.

I decided to keep the original white color because I could wash it, but I thought a white vinyl top would be one of the most disastrous areas to try to keep clean.

I found a beautiful gun metal gray vinyl top that, to me, set the vehicle off even better. It's in showroom condition. Most hearses are stereotyped in black, which goes back to the old days of death.

I still have a lot more to do to the interior. The sun has faded the material on the front set and I'd like to replace the curtains because they're stretched out from the heat. They're light blue and I'd like to go with a dark blue to match the interior.

I drive the hearse for parades and functions related to the holidays. I use it for sentimental reasons. When I drive in a parade, there is a sign in the window that reads "In memory of our war dead." This is in memory of the people who gave their lives in the line of duty.

I was a little worried when I first started taking it to different functions, but I've had a lot of positive responses.

You have to be very careful when you're dealing with people's feelings over the loss of loved ones; I'm no stranger to that. I knew a gentleman who was a Vietnam veteran and was pretty much my family until he died of brain cancer a few years ago.

His wife donated his flag to me to use for parades to help people honor and remember our war dead. I wanted to get people's attention and remind them that this is important.

I talked to a lot of people and did a lot of soul searching before I decided to use my car in a parade. It's a real honor and I enjoy it.

—As told to Tara Marion

Bruce Coburn lives in Kalamazoo. He drives a 1988 Chevy van and owns The TV Man.