



Aaron Rosenblatt/Daily Republic

Randy Kunes poses next to his 1953 Chrysler New Yorker at his home in Fairfield. Kunes said his father originally owned the rare vehicle.

Labor of love

Man restores his dad's beloved car

AMY MAGINNIS-HONEY
DAILY REPUBLIC

The 1953 Chrysler New Yorker Deluxe Newport was never far from Randy Kunes' heart.

He grew up in the back seat, earned his driver's license behind its wheel, and posed by it on high school graduation day, wearing his cap and gown.

Kunes purchased the car from his father in 1970. It remained with his parents, Archie and Dolores Kunes, in Weedville, Penn., while Randy Kunes served in the United States Air Force for 20 years.

The dream was for father and son to restore it when life quieted down for Randy Kunes. That plan had to be altered after Archie Kunes was diagnosed with cancer in 1996.

The car was put on a trailer and hauled to Randy Kunes' home in Fairfield, where he spent the next decade restoring the cherished vehicle to its original condition.

There was one surprising discovery along the way. The car's color was called Hollywood Maroon. Kunes was sure it was the original color. Research said otherwise.

The original owner, who had it for a brief time, painted the car to

match the fleet of cars he used in his funeral business. He didn't keep the car long because it had two doors and people weren't happy about having to get into the back seat, Kunes said.

The vehicle had left the factory with a pearl gray body and all black top.

Kunes had to strip down the paint to the metal to bring it back to its original hue.

"Even Dad did not know the car had been painted," Kunes said.

Archie Kunes died in 1998. He never saw the completed restoration. Dolores Kunes died about eight months later.

There are times Kunes said he can sit in the back seat and picture his mom and dad in the front seat. The memories of going out in the car on a Saturday or Sunday for hamburgers and ice cream flow freely, he said.

There was one car Archie Kunes loved more than the 1953 Chrysler. It was a 1946 Chrysler New Yorker. He sold it to put a down payment on a house for the family, Randy Kunes said.

Randy Kunes did most of the restoration on the New Yorker himself, stripping it down to its frame. There were two other key players, The Clutch Connection and Vaca Valley Auto Parts for their assistance in rebuilding the transmission and finding parts, Kunes said.

"We had fun doing research on the car," said Jack Martin of Vaca Valley Auto Parts. "It was a pleasure to see someone who really appreciated it."

Martin said he's seen thousands of restored cars and hot rods during his nearly 40 years in the business. Kunes' Chrysler New Yorker tops the list.

"You cannot find anything more original than that car," Martin said.

There were only 3,517 of that model produced, Kunes said. He estimates it's one of about a dozen left. He's discovered two others on the Internet: one in Dover, Del., the second in Chicago. The latter is in need of restoration, he said.

There's also one for sale on eBay that has been restored, but not to its original condition, Kunes said.

Kunes has been taking the car to shows and has racked up eight first places and five best of shows. He came home a week ago with another first place from the Hillsborough Concours d'Elegance in the post-war division for cars representing 1947-54. There were eight cars in the category. Those were selected from among 300 and 400 applications, Kunes said.

He would love to show the car at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. Martin said he hopes to accompany Kunes when that happens.

The car has been featured in Drive magazine and on the "My Classic Car" TV show. Dennis Gage, the show's host, spent about 10 minutes putting the New Yorker in tip-top shape before filming, Kunes said.

Kunes' original intention in restoring the car was to drive it daily around town. A neighbor told him he might want to think twice about that and told Kunes he had a pretty rare car.

An incident on the streets of Fairfield a few years ago convinced him that driving it around town might not be a good idea.

While stopped at a traffic light, with his wife Yoshie Kunes in the passenger seat, a woman in the car ahead of them exited her vehicle and walked around the New Yorker to get a better look. Randy Kunes estimated he and the drivers behind him sat through two red lights while she did her looking. Eventually, she returned to her car, saying nothing to the Kuneses, and took off.

Kunes purchased a trailer to transport the car to shows, narrowing the chance of an accident while driving it on the road.

You can learn more about the car at www.1953chryslernewyorker.com.

Reach Amy Maginnis-Honey at 427-6957 or amaginnis@dailyrepublic.net.