



Shop talk: Elkton resident Dave Ellingsen pens a handbook for young mechanics

By Lisa Broadt lbroadt@cecilwhig.com | July 17, 2013

Dave Ellingsen was undeterred when his parents, having learned of a recent joyride, confiscated his keys. The 12-year-old simply hotwired his '61 Plymouth and got back on the road.

Ellingsen knew he had a gift. He could easily take apart, fix and reassemble go-carts, cars, construction equipment – anything with a current, really. He put his talent to good use at his first professional mechanic job at a small, independent repair shop.

Now, more than 30 years and several shops later, the Elkton resident, who is a Master ASE mechanic, works at Porter Infiniti in Newark and wants to share his knowledge with other mechanics.

Throughout his career, Ellingsen said, he saw numerous colleagues drop out of the profession – not because they were unskilled or lacked passion, but because they couldn't figure out the industry's groove.

In fact, Ellingsen says, about nine out of every 10 mechanics don't make it.

“The Auto Tech's Handbook,” he hopes, will reverse that trend.

“I saw a lot of guys fail...they'd wanted to work in cars their whole lives, but they came into a shop and didn't get it,” the first-time author said.

The self-published book, intended to appeal to mechanics in the first ten years of their career, explores – and offers solutions – to industry pitfalls.

“Dave’s book is not just about fixing cars – it’s about building a career,” explained Mark Huddel, the planner of technical training for Nissan North America. “You’ll learn that doing things the right way can lead you to a satisfying and well paying job.”

According to Ellingsen, even basic concepts, like a shop’s typical pay system, are widely misunderstood. Most shops employ a flat rate system where mechanics are paid by the piece rather than by the hour, he said. It’s a system where efficiency is key to making money, as is top-notch customer service – the kind that keeps patrons coming back.

“Guys out of school really don’t understand how important it is to treat a customer properly and to fix their car right the first time,” Ellingsen explained. “(We) don’t get paid if no one comes through that door.”

Throughout the handbook’s 33 chapters, Ellingsen explores a raft of practical issues, from the cost of investing in tools, to proper behavior in a meeting and the importance of doing your homework. The down-to-earth book even addresses workplace gossip and the cost of smoke breaks.

“It’s not a game of survivor,” Ellingsen said, laughing. “(Gossip) takes up a lot of time and affects morale.”

“A couple 10 minute smoke breaks add up to a huge loss of productivity over time,” he added. “During a busy day, when you smoke a cigarette, you’re just drawing the shop down. Owners hate that.”

Ellingsen also hopes, he said, that those outside the industry will take a look at the book.

“I’m trying to change the perception of a mechanic as a used car salesman,” he said “I want guys to understand... Maybe you can get away with stealing once or twice, but (the customer) won’t come back the third time. I don’t want the public to see us as crooks.”

Though the book contains a wealth of information, the author made readability a priority.

“It’s easy to read. I could have made it 700 pages, but I kept chopping it down to make it easy to read,” he said.

While it took Ellingsen only four or five months to write manuscript, it took almost four years to finalize and edit the book. Almost a year and half of that time, he said, was devoted to historical research. As a result, the book includes an extensive timeline of little-known, but important mechanical history.

It also includes about 90 photographs.

“My target audience is a young guy, 16-25, so there’s got to be some pictures,” he laughed. “Even when I hand this book to grown men, the first thing they say is ‘Dave, I love the pictures.’”

“The Auto Tech's Handbook: An Insider's Guide to Life in the Repair Business” by David J. Ellingsen is available for purchase at:

<https://www.autotechsoftskills.com>. For more information, email sandra@autotechsoftskills.com.

