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AUTOMOBILES | COLLECTING

In This Auto-Shop Class, Life Lessons Were Part of the Curriculum

By ROY FURCHGOTT DEC. 12, 2014

KENSINGTON, MD. — Marie Lerch was educated at some very proper institutions: Maryvale Preparatory School for girls, on the fringe of Maryland horse country; Loyola College in Baltimore; and American University in Washington.

But the education that mattered most, she said, came from night school auto-shop classes, studying under a quietly charismatic instructor by the name of Bill Campbell and under the hood of a 1978 Chevrolet Camaro named Little Monster.

Ms. Lerch is now semiretired, and Mr. Campbell died nearly 20 years ago, but the life lessons endure, as does Little Monster, which Ms. Lerch still drives in nice weather — and still works on occasionally.

An unlikely candidate for a mechanic's class — in 2013, women made up just 2 percent of auto mechanics and technicians, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics — Ms. Lerch was recalled as “delicate” by a high school acquaintance, Ramsey Flynn. She possesses a casual refinement more typical of her former role as a marketing and communications executive.

“I think, at most, there were two women in the class,” a classmate, Jonathan Rains, said. “One of the guys in class, to give you some perspective, was a B24 bombardier.”

Ms. Lerch said she had always liked cars, but the attraction grew when, as a teenager, she first saw a Camaro.

“I certainly liked Corvettes, the E-Type Jag,” she said, “but the Camaro was the coolest car I thought I could afford.”

She collected Camaro reviews and advertisements in a folder, planning to someday buy one. When she got her first job after college, she could afford either an apartment or a car. No contest: She commuted an hour each way in her 1977 Camaro, often taking back roads, though (or because) it lengthened her drive.

That car was totaled in a collision at a stoplight. Its replacement was a metallic blue 1978 Camaro LT, Chevy’s Luxury Touring option. To some, the ’78 model was a marked improvement in design. It was the first Camaro to have its flexible bumpers integrated with the car’s body panels at the front and back, giving it a nearly exotic sleekness. To others, the styling improvements didn’t offset the spongy handling and sluggish acceleration.

Ms. Lerch bought her new Camaro with a 305-cubic-inch V8 rated at 145 horsepower. With a curb weight of more than 3,400 pounds, it was considered a bit anemic. She added an optional automatic transmission, air-conditioning and the LT package, which included bucket seats, a console, a tachometer and a clock, none of which improved performance.

Still, she named the car Little Monster, “just because it was powerful and fast,” she said. Love is blind.

Assisted by her employer in earning a master’s degree in public relations, she decided she’d later take a class for fun. Ms. Lerch wasn’t sure what that might be until a catalog for the local adult education program arrived in the mail.

“This is what I wanted most,” she remembers thinking. “Automobile mechanics.”

Her devotion to car repair and Little Monster was cemented when she was faced with the soft-spoken African-American man at the teacher’s desk who would not just teach her how to change spark plugs but how to conduct herself in business and in

life.

“To me that class was a life changer because of Bill Campbell,” she said.

In fact, Ms. Lerch would take that class every term it was offered, something like 15 semesters in all, she said. She wasn’t the only one: The students devised an alert system so the first person to get the catalog phoned the regulars to rush their applications in.

Part of the attraction was the environment that Mr. Campbell created.

“He was someone I could really trust, and he was really there for us, and I can’t say that of many teachers I have had in my life,” Mr. Rains said.

For Ms. Lerch, car repair was a welcome contrast to the business realm.

“If you did it right, it worked,” she said. “There was no politics — not like the corporate world.”

The first class always started with Mr. Campbell laying out the rules, which were simple and inviolate.

“Class would be three hours,” Ms. Lerch recalled. “There would be no yelling. There would be no profanity. The classroom would be cleaner when we left than when we came in.”

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Though strict, Mr. Campbell didn’t exactly punish transgressors.

“If they yelled, he didn’t see them,” Ms. Lerch said.

Since no one could make repairs without Mr. Campbell, the threat of invisibility kept the class in line.

Ms. Lerch learned the basics of maintaining Little Monster, changing the oil and replacing brake pads, but she learned bigger lessons too.

“These were lessons you heard your entire life, but they were mere abstractions,” she said. “In this class they were no longer abstractions, they became so real and soaked in.”

One lesson was the importance of cooperation. Mr. Campbell helped students in turn, so the way to get him to your task quickly was to help those ahead in line to complete theirs. Another was to build on people’s strengths. Because of her slender arms, her specialty became the hard-to-reach spark plugs, she said.

But most critical for her was overcoming a lifelong habit of rushing through work. That lesson stuck when she flubbed a messy maintenance task.

“Changing the transmission fluid in a Camaro is just ridiculous because there is no drain plug,” she said. Instead she had to undo the 14 bolts securing the fluid sump, after which “red transmission fluid would rain down on your head.”

One night, after changing the fluid and filter, Little Monster wouldn’t shift gears. Mr. Campbell watched as Ms. Lerch again loosened bolts and suffered the red rain, then neatly laying the parts out on a shop towel as he had taught her. He gently pointed out that the filter was turned the wrong way, blocking the linkage.

“I felt like, ‘Well, he’s so right,’ ” she said. “People always told me to slow down. He really got me to be mindful.”

Eventually the class was discontinued, but Ms. Lerch kept in contact with Mr. Campbell, occasionally meeting for lunches where they would chat about cars. It was a surprise to her when, in April 1995, a classmate called to say that Mr. Campbell had died of a heart attack. He was 63.

Ms. Lerch never again bonded with a mentor quite as she had with Mr. Campbell, nor with a car quite the way she had with Little Monster. When she decided it was time for a practical winter car, she bought a Jeep Grand Cherokee — and the shop manual for it.

“I think I changed the oil once,” she said, concluding that she had neither time nor interest in working on the Jeep.

Little Monster moved to the garage, which is decorated with car-print curtains she made and a sign reading Camaro Drive. Little Monster is reserved for pleasure rides, which usually means taking Stanley, her English setter, to the park.

Though garaged, Little Monster remained a touchstone to Mr. Campbell's teachings.

"That class made me, as a leader, want to be like Bill," she said.

Those lessons apparently took. To celebrate her pending retirement, Ms. Lerch's co-workers put together a 20-page book of tributes to commemorate her consistently unflappable management style.

Now 36 years old, Little Monster has had some cosmetic work on the body, the interior is worn and liberally coated in Stanley fur. Piloting Little Monster on a cruise through her suburban Washington neighborhood, Ms. Lerch is smooth on the gas pedal, tracking smartly around corners. As she drove, she tried to explain the pleasure she gets from driving with the Rolling Stones "Hot Rocks" album playing.

"I don't know," she said. "It makes me feel young. It just makes me feel happy."

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