

Classic cars: Darin Irvine's passion becomes a career

BY JOLYNN PAIGE

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Up in Northport, Darin Irvine has what many would consider a dream job. He specializes in restoring old cars to their glory days.

And his work is getting noticed by those in the know, such as Frank Hagerty, of Hagerty Insurance, a company that insures collector cars and boats.

A few years ago, Hagerty hired Irvine to restore a 1960s Porsche, which he had given to his daughter. He wanted to have it smartened up from the inside out. Irvine did the restoration work and J.P. VanRaalte of Van's in Leland did the mechanical assembly on the car.

Hagerty was so impressed by Irvine and J.P.'s work that he asked them both to go with him to show it off at the Concourse at Meadow Brooke Hall in Detroit last August, a big event in the world of collector cars.

Irvine, a third generation auto-restoration tradesman, learned everything he knows hands-on from his father, George Irvine, while growing up in Detroit. George learned the trade from his father-in-law, who was a Romanian immigrant.

In 1968, George moved the family from Detroit to Traverse City, where he became the body shop manager at the Pontiac dealership. In 1989, George decided to focus on restoration work, which led him to open the still-thriving Pump House in Northport.

Darin Irvine started working on cars — the first one being a 1931 Rio Royale — with his dad when he was 14 years old.

"Body work guys often need to work on special interest cars because it helps them keep their sanity," Irvine said. "Working on body repair can be negative — the motivation is empty, and a person can feel like a mash doctor. To me, it feels better putting effort into something that isn't just going to die later. Working on special

interest cars — hot rod cars — is much more positive experience. Usually customers are excited before they even show up, which makes it fun for me."

Irvine said that people want their classic cars restored for many different reasons: there are customers who don't know automobiles in a mechanical sense; there are people, as in the case with Lee Hagerty's and his daughter's Porsche, who want to restore a car for sentimental value; and there are those who want to build an investment.

The collector car market is thriving right now, according

to Irvine.

"Fifteen to twenty years ago, sailboat and motor homes were what all retirees and second-homers wanted," he said. "Now they want a classic car. I don't know if the car is in addition to a sailboat and a motor home, or if the cars are replacing the other hobbies, but my dad and I have seen a tremendous increase in interest of classic car collecting in northern Michigan over the past several years.

For example, in the summer time, there will be at least two car shows every weekend. You no longer have an art fair or a festival; you have

an art and car show. A festival and car show. People want to show off their cars, and it's fun."

It's no surprise that people with time and money on their hands are now turning to classic cars as a hobby.

The winding roads and hilly landscape of northern Michigan are perfectly compatible with car enthusiasts. What better place than Leelanau, Benzie, or Antrim Counties to drive? It's like Europe: vineyards, scenic roads, waters and restaurants.

You wouldn't think that a person could locate to such a remote area such as Northport and could have

such a thriving business by doing what he loves. But, as Irvine pointed out, people who want to get the job done right will spare no expense when it comes to their cars. Many of his clients live elsewhere in the summer; some don't even live in the area at all, but are willing to freight their car to Irvine because they know he can do the job right.

Irvine's connections haven't come by way of advertising in the traditional sense. In fact, he doesn't even have a yellow pages ad.

Jolynn Paige is a local freelance writer.

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