

Customization shops set trends for auto companies

By Andre Coe

Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA) — Here's a little tip for all the would-be millionaires out there: You don't need to be famous in order to gain superstar attention. Just ask 24-year-old Corie Pyburn.

After retiring from the U.S. Marines, Pyburn immediately applied his knowledge of economics to financing his "hobby," a powder blue, 2002 Chevrolet Avalanche truck he bought used for \$23,000 and upgraded it with an additional \$19,100.

The file specialist with First Horizon Mortgage Company loves the attention his ride named Jennifer (in honor of his wife) gives him.

"It's one of the hottest things in Dallas right now," Pyburn says. "It's been on Flava T.V. and everybody always comes and asks about it."

Pyburn's truck is a perfect 10, despite the fact that he believes it is "missing one piece."

From the rare set of 24-inch Dub Shaolin rims to the "pimped out" ostrich skin seats in the front and back parts of the vehicle, Jennifer is a classic head turner.

To finance his hobby Pyburn sets aside 20 percent of his earnings, he said. He is married, but has no children. Jennifer is his child. She seems to glide, not ride, across the pavement. At just the right speeds, her front and back rims rotate in opposite directions, dazzling onlookers and making a few wonder if they are seeing things.

They aren't.

Davins, the original spinning rims, have caught on nationwide. David Fowlkes, an African-American, invented them in 1998. Five years later, Fowlkes patented his rims — U.S. Patent No. 6,554,370. Among his first clients to trash their "factory" rims for the luxurious Davins were sports stars Benito Santiago, Shaquille O'Neal, Terrell Owens and rapper Master P.

Rims go by many names: dubs, twinkies, Emmitt Smiths or Michael Jordans, for example.

Most names match an athlete's jersey number with the size of the rim. Michael Jordans, for example, would be 23-inch rims. However, there are exceptions.

The most common nickname, Sprewells, refers to a 1990s showing of MTV's "Cribs," a popular pop-culture show that featured NBA

superstar Lattrell Sprewell.

Few people knew what to call the spinning contraptions that mesmerized television viewers then, but everyone recognized Sprewell. Without knowing what to call the rims, people immediately associated Sprewell's name with the rims. Thus, the popular nickname — Sprewells. The corn-rowed Minnesota Timberwolves' basketball star has since capitalized on that name association; he sells Davins from his own customization shop, Sprewell Motorsports.

Pyburn's flava fame is part of an ongoing trend of customizing vehicles, old and new. In today's slang, it is called "tricking out" or "pimping" a ride.

For the right price — an "easy" \$10,000 on the low-end — you can roll on a set of "twinkies," 20-inch rims.

If \$10,000 is too much bling for all the Joes working nine-to-five, an affordable set of "knock off" rims (also known as generics) can be purchased for anywhere from \$2,300 for 20-inch Diablo rims and tires, which are similar to Lowenharts, and \$7,500 for 26-inch Echelons, which are similar to Giovanni Attacks, or \$18,000 for 28-inch TIS rims and tires, which are "in a class of their own," according to those in the know.

Trendsetters, located on W. Camp Wisdom Road in Dallas, tricked out Pyburn's ride and has been hired by several local dealerships to do their "aftermarket" customization.

Duncanville Ford sales consultant Fletcher Stiff said car dealerships make extra money in after-market customizations. Customers regularly request car alarms, window tinting, grills/billets, "screens," and, of course, rims, on their new cars, he said.

Prior to transferring to the Duncanville location, Stiff

worked for Grand Prairie Ford, a company that had contracted Trendsetters for all of its aftermarket work.

Stiff said that major auto manufacture's have also taken notice of after-market customization work done at places such as Trendsetters. He used the latest Ford F-150s on his lot as an example.

"Before, they used to be just a Plain Jane pick-up," he said. "Even the gear shift now comes in chrome. Trendsetters does a lot of neat stuff. They put cameras in the back license plate so you can see what is behind you and around the vehicle when you are backing up."

The Lexus RX330 and the Acura MDX now offer these same safety features. Ford offers sound devices that alert the driver to objects behind them. In addition to safety features, several auto manufacturers have taken notice of the "bump" in numerous customer's trunks: Bose speakers come standard in many GM vehicles nowadays.

Eric Freeman, owner of Trendsetters, took the road less traveled to learn how to customize rides. He started by installing a new stereo system in his first car, a 1979 Honda Accord that was "messed up, Man." Like his customer's rides, he has evolved since then. He has a spinning set of Davins on his metallic Black Cadillac Escalade; Pyburn had his ride tricked out at Trendsetters.

Freeman compares the chromed out head-turners to two popular food items, milk and cereal and macaroni and cheese: "A car without rims is like cereal with no milk," he said. "You can't have one without the other. It's like macaroni with no cheese. It's no good."

After installing the stereo system on his '79 Honda, Freeman needed a way to continue his love affair with

customizing rides.

"But just on the strength of me wanting to work, I didn't have any experience," he said. "And back then they wouldn't hire you unless you had experience."

To gain experience, Freeman spent a year-and-a-half working for free at an Irving customization shop, Traffic

Jam, which has since gone out of business. Freeman moved on from Traffic Jam in 1989 to NB Auto in 1992. Next up on his apprenticeship tutelage was Aycock Auto from 1992 to 1995 and Mastertouch in 1997.

Freeman's apprenticeship paid off when he started his own customization shop,

Trendsetters, in 1999.

His ascent was natural, said his business associate, Akili Gray. He said Freeman put his time in at the shop and learned just about everything he could about the business and the customers that supported the business. A lot of times, he would just sit in the

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Entrepreneurs encouraging more Black-on-Black buying

By Queshonda Moore
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) — An increasing number of business leaders are proposing "Buy Black" movements as a way of empowering the Black community.

"We have to let people know that we will only spend money with people who spend money with us. Other than that, we will always sit around and cry the blues," says Mary Ann Mitchell, chair of the National Black Business Council in Culver City, California.

Black-owned businesses suffer economically from the lack of support from their own people.

"Blacks only spend 5 percent within the Black economy," says John Templeton, executive editor of Blackmoney.com.

University of Georgia's Selig Center for Economic Growth, reports that the Black spending power was \$318 billion in 1990. In 2002, the figure stood at \$688 billion and is projected to grow to \$921 billion in 2008, and increase to 189 percent over 18 years.

Templeton says redirecting even a segment of those dollars to other Blacks will have a major impact.

"It will increase the opportunity for employment," he explains.

The unemployment rate for African-American's is at 10.1 percent — more than double the rate for Whites (5.5 percent). Templeton says that without support from African-Americans, the Black unemployment rate will not improve.

And nor is it likely to improve without more Blacks starting their own businesses. Although racial discrimination and lack of capital are two of the many hurdles that

African-Americans must overcome, there are other problems as well.

"We don't have connections. It's a matter of access. I don't think that it is all about racial discrimination," says Mitchell. She says that when it comes to business it's a matter of having access. "We are not exposed."

Dr. Ying Lowery, an economist for the Small Business Administration, says Asians provide a model for starting businesses. "Within the Black community, families can get together and combine all their earnings and that could be the startup capital," Lowery says.

Lowery is not alone in that view.

"Within the Asian-American communities ethnic banks pull community resources, like people depositing their money. That provides a source of finance for a new business development," says Cecelia Conrad, research associate with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C. and associate professor of economics at Pomona College in Claremont, California.

According to a November 2001, Small Business Administration report of United States businesses, Blacks owned 4 percent, American Indians owned 9 percent, Asian-Americans 4.4 percent and Hispanics owned 5.8 percent.

Aubry Stone, president and CEO of the California Black Chamber of Commerce, says Blacks hold the key to their own success.

"The problem is our inability to partner with each other," he says. "We must trust each other more. Until that happens, nothing good is going to happen."

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