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- Partners
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Hot rods transcend disabilities

By Lisa Martino  
iCan News Service, contributor  
May 4, 2001

It doesn't matter where you live -- one sure way to turn heads is to cruise down the street in a custom or vintage set of wheels.

Whether it's the gleam of the chrome, the purr of the engine, a hunger for speed or the sexy curves of a spoiler that fuel the passions of hot rod lovers, the allure of a roadster transcends gender, culture, generation gaps -- and disabilities.

Patrick Cottini of Quincy, Calif., not only thinks his 1956 Chevy 210 Del Ray is a beautiful creation, but says working on it with the help of his family was therapeutic.

"I had no finger function, and by restoring the car it helped bring back my finger function and strength," said Cottini, who at the time was recuperating from a C7 spinal cord injury.

Cottini became interested in hot rod restoration after his physical therapist pointed out that older cars had bigger doors and would make it easier for him to get his wheelchair in and out.

He soon came across the Del Ray, which sat neglected in a barn with bullet holes in the rear window.

"Choosing a vehicle really has to do with individual taste and preference," he said. "I went with what was available and looked good. Since my dad and I restored the '56, we could make it look the way we wanted. (Choice) also has to do with what works for an individual's disability, too.

"If they need to put in a lift or ramp, they might want to look into a Sedan Delivery, or a '40s-'50s style wagon."

Although the definition of a hot rod varies with the builder, there are basically two types:

1. vintage rods built to match the original car as closely as possible with as many original parts as possible

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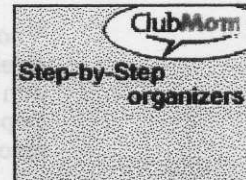
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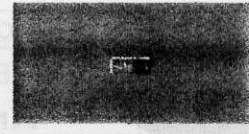
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For

2. high-tech rods, with custom parts and bodies.

The amount you spend depends on how deep your pockets go and how far your imagination can take you. As long as you maintain a balance of performance and aesthetics, you're on your way from jalopy to hot rod status.



After spending \$9,000 to restore the coupe over three years, Cottini spent another \$600 for standard hand controls for under the steering column and a dimmer switch for the headlights. Then, he was ready to roll.

"The hand controls had to be custom fit along with a lot of the parts on any hot rod. The cost was not too expensive, because we did a lot of work ourselves," he said.

Finding custom fit parts to make the vehicle accessible, like swivel seats or lifts, was not very hard, Cottini said.

"AAA.com can be a great resource, and NewMobility.com," Cottini said. "Look in your area phone book for resources as well.

"I now do driving assessments for individuals with disabilities and my father does driver training for individuals with disabilities. Both of us are ventered through the Department of Rehabilitation -- they, too, are a wonderful resource on adaptive driving technology."

Owning a hot rod isn't just about the thrill of seeing a project through to a successful end. Upon completion of your dream machine, you can either cruise the strip solo or enter your beauty in a competition.

Cottini belongs to the Sierra Cascade Street Rodders, which holds cruise nights, car shows and picnics. He also looks forward each year to the Hot August Nights hot rod gathering in Reno, Nev., where car enthusiasts come together to check out the unique creations.

"That is the neat thing about building a hot rod, you can make it the way that works for you and how much money you have to spend," he said.

Lisa Martino is a Metro Detroit freelance writer. She is a former staff writer for Detroit's alternative weekly newspaper, Metro Times, and an editor for Detroit.Citysearch.com.

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