

NEWS • RECORD

www.zumbrota.com

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

Marti and Engel of Carriage House living the auto dream

Alicia Hunt-Welch
Reporter

Wednesday, June 10, 2009



WANAMINGO - Dave Engel and Steve Marti draw many curious observers through their garage doors. Some people wonder exactly what they do. Others know but are fascinated with the latest project. Engel and Marti own Carriage House Custom Automotive in Wanamingo. They are living a dream and operating a specialty car business.

Engel and Marti met while working as airline mechanics for Northwest Airlines (NWA). Marti, from Red Wing, was into drag racing as a hobby. Circle track racing took up Engel's free time. With their mutual love of cars and racing, they found they had much in common. Engel, from Kenyon, said he worked for NWA for 16 years before deciding to give it up. Both men quit on the eve of the airline mechanics strike. Engel said, "It was a good time to get out." They left with a dream to build fine racing machines and collector cars and hopes to crank it into a profitable life.

In 2005 they launched an automotive shop in Zumbrota. Then three years ago, the Romness Garage building went up for sale and Main Street Wanamingo became their home.

Dave Engel, left, and Steve Marti, owners of Carriage House Custom Automotive, show their new rental road racecar. A new website will allow car enthusiasts a chance to follow the progress on classic restorations and muscle cars. Engel and Marti are about to begin transforming a 2010 Camaro SS into a Roadrace car.

Carriage House Custom Automotive is geared toward anything related to racing. They build and prepare all kinds of autos for race condition. They primarily do road race vehicles but also work on drag racers and other types of competition cars. The business provides maintenance for muscle cars and restoration of classic cars. Carriage House Custom Automotive can strip it down and rebuild a sweet ride from the ground up, complete with body work and pristine paint. They offer everything needed for a project from start to finish. Engel says this makes their business stand out from other auto shops. In fact, Engel estimates about 70% of their business comes from other shops

that accepted a job, and then either couldn't handle it or couldn't finish the work properly. On average, Carriage House builds about 25 motors a year and can provide the high performance parts needed to make that engine purr like a kitten. A majority of the labor in the shop is supplied by Marti and Engel. In addition they have two part-time employees.

With extra space in the garage, they have begun to offer car storage. Last year business boomed and they ran out of room. As luck would have it, the building and adjacent lot across the street, once owned by Schaefer Heating and Air Conditioning, went up for sale. Engel and Marti purchased the building in September. As a result, they are able to offer both heated and cold storage for vehicles. The additional lot is currently used for car trailer parking.

In addition to building and restoring cars, Carriage House Custom Automotive has a company rental car. This is not the average loaner you get while yours is being repaired. This rental car is built for road racing events; for drivers who want to get their feet wet without having to sell an arm, leg and a kidney to give it a try! Engel said they plan to have more rentals available in the future.

Word of mouth has brought a lot of business their way. They also recently launched www.carriagehousecustoms.com. The website will enable car enthusiasts to follow the progress of certain vehicles under construction in the garage.

In their downtime they have been remodeling the old building. Last year the roof experienced water damage, due to lack of maintenance over the years. The front portion of the building is under construction. Once finished the lobby area will be off the Main Street entrance. Engel said it will have a 1930's feel and offer local gabbers a place to gather while enjoying their morning coffee. The exterior facelift will be finished by July 4.

The boys with their toys seem to have it all: a specialty business that is able to get by in this recession. But do their wives complain that they spend all their time in the garage? Not at all, and in fact Engel's wife is also involved in the business. She came up with the business name and keeps the business records in top shape. Marti explained that this is their job, not a hobby, so they have to make it profitable.

Any regrets for walking away from the airline industry?

Engel said no, he doesn't miss the work. Marti added with a laugh, "Just the pay!"