

# A Classic love story

## Fond du Lac man has passion for restoring old cars

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For Mike Freund, it was simply a case of love at first sight — as well as touch and sound.

As the then 10-year-old Freund first glanced at the 1955 green and white Chevrolet his father Dick had purchased and brought home to restore, his heart fluttered at a rate that no classroom crush would be able to match.

“The original paint was still on the car when he purchased it,” said Freund, a Fond du Lac native, noting that his father still has the ‘55 Chevy he procured that day 38 years ago. “He tore it down, put a motor in and completed work on the interior, body, paint, wheels, tires and brakes. That was my introduction to the industry and my interest just grew from there.”

His fate, Freund said, had been sealed.

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**Mike Freund stands by a 1955 Chevy two-door sedan he rebuilt for himself.** The Business News photo by Taylor Hale





Rebuilt cars are lined up outside Mike Freund's Classics Plus in Fond du Lac.

# Classic/First project was a 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air

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The president and co owner (alongside his father) of Classics Plus, an auto restoration shop in Fond du Lac, Freund, 48, notes that the love for his craft has intensified in ways he could not have imagined since his days as a youth.

"I have had a love for old cars for a long time and it keeps getting stronger," said Freund, who launched Classics Plus in 1988, two years removed from his high school graduation. "It's not even a love, really, but a passion, and when someone has a passion for something, it's a world unto itself, and that's what I have with these old cars. I love building them up and taking something that most people would think to throw away and turn it into a work of art."

The canvas for Freund's brand of artistry has mainly been that of '50s model Chevrolets. In fact, according to Freund, his volume of experience on mid-50s model Chevrolets has earned him the nickname "tri-five guy" from locals — although he said that he welcomes most any classic car into his garage.

"We work on everything," said Freund, adding that his portfolio includes projects ranging from a 1928 Ford Model A to a 1979 Chevy pickup truck. "While I specialize in the tri-five (1955-57) years, most of the time it's a lot of the '40s, '50s and '60s vehicles that are in here."

While 99 percent of the work Freund and his staff complete are comprehensive vehicle restorations ("basically tearing cars completely down to bare bone and starting from scratch," Freund said), Classics Plus' catalog of services also entails custom paint jobs, restoring and polishing stainless steel trim and steering wheel restoration.

His staff is comprised of his son, Nick, 28, and his father, 72, who helps out on a limited basis.

Whatever one's objective once they drop their vehicle off at the company's 25-year old headquarters at 601 Lakeshore Drive in Fond du Lac, it's a collaborative effort from start to finish.

"When a customer comes in, what they usually want for their car and what it looks like when it leaves here are two different things," said Freund, who has completed jobs for car enthusiasts from Arizona, Iowa, Nebraska and New York, in addition to the Fox Valley.

"[Customers] have a pretty good idea, but until they see it stripped down and ripped completely apart, they tend to change things up a bit," he said. "At every step, the process has constant communication. I tell all of my customers

that at any given time they are more than welcome to stop by the shop."

Between the combination of continued transparency and dialogue and breathing life into classic automobiles which has led to a regular stream of referral business, Freund said that demand for Classics Plus' services has been consistent since day one.

"We have been pretty consistent since we opened," said Freund, noting that the first project he worked on was a ground-up restoration of a 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air two-door hardtop. "After that first order, quite a bit of our business was — and continues to be — word of mouth."

Although the number of vehicles he has worked on is not something which Freund can readily recall, such is a minor detail when, according to the lifelong Wisconsin resident, you are living your dream.

Working as an auto mechanic after high school, Freund, while happy to be around the steel and chrome of automobiles, desired to be constantly surrounded by the classics, not the modern-day vehicles of the 9-to-5 crowd.

"It just wasn't doing it for me, working on the newer stuff," he said. "It wasn't my cup of tea. I always had it in the back of my mind that I wanted to run my own business some day, and I wanted to do it with older cars as its focus."

Upon renting out a space to complete the restoration of the 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air (a project entrusted to him by a friend of his uncle's), Classics Plus was officially launched and he never looked back.

"I love challenges," Freund said, "and I keep striving to produce a high-quality product. Basically, do the best job you can and keep the customers happy."

Such is an area in which Freund has not fallen short.

Through features on his creations in magazines (such as StreetScene, Street Rodder and Rod & Custom, among others) and multiple awards at car shows both in Wisconsin and across the county, the impact of Freund's work is evident.

"When you're at [car] shows and someone takes a photo of one of our cars or some Joe Blow shakes a customer's hand and tells them they have an awesome car, that's what it's all about," he said.

After nearly three decades as a business owner, Freund's short and long-term goals, unlike the restoration of cars seemingly off the set of American Graffiti, is simple and uncomplicated.

"My plan," Freund said, "is to take it day by day and just keep plugging away."