

ABRN

AUTOMOTIVE BODY REPAIR NEWS

SHOP PROFILE

WHITE AUTO BODY

Tooling Up

Shop builds volume, adds equipment

By Heidi Moore
Contributing Editor

Growing up in St. Louis County, Mo., Steve White loved working on antique automobiles with his father. At the time he never imagined that his dad's expensive hobby would lead to a multimillion-dollar collision repair business.

When White entered a body shop program at the local technical high school, he quickly

realized that he'd found his calling. Two veteran shop teachers took him under their wings, and he was eager to absorb everything they had to teach. "The instructors there were both very much old-time guys. They actually taught me how to use lead, which was already something that wasn't being done," he says. "I was always a quality-oriented person. I wanted to know the best way to do it, not necessarily the fastest."

When White entered a body shop program at the local technical high school, he quickly

realized that he'd found his calling. Two veteran shop teachers took him under their wings, and he was eager to absorb everything they had to teach. "The instructors there were both very much old-time guys. They actually taught me how to use lead, which was already something that wasn't being done," he says. "I was always a quality-oriented person. I wanted to know the best way to do it, not necessarily the fastest."

Pretty crazy times, but we were young and broke and didn't know any better," he says. In those early days, White Auto Body in Florissant, Mo., was a small shop with seven bays. When the business started generating money, White debated whether he would invest the capital in a frame machine or a paint booth. He recalls, "I determined that I could always polish the paint and make it look acceptable, but if I didn't have the frame right,



Photos courtesy of White Auto Body

technology also proved persuasive when dealing with insurance companies. "What it does is stop the adversarial relationship right off the bat," White says.

Today, White's two body shops—a second location, White Auto Body West, opened in O'Fallon, Mo., in 1998—occupy a total of 33,500 sq. ft. and, together, boast 60 bays. "When I started my first shop, I had a toolbox full of tools and a big hammer. And it went from that to our new facility with nine frame machines and computerized measuring for unibody," White says, adding that the management system has been essential to the business's expansion.

On the other hand, upgrading the technology proved easier than establishing a loyal customer base at the new location. With one successful collision repair business under his belt, he was expecting the same loyalties to transfer to the new shop, but he discovered instead that he had to start from scratch. "You have to prove yourself. Loyalty is a lot like trust—you have to develop it. You have to do what you can and say what you do," he says.

White credits his technicians with helping him gain his new customers' loyalty. In addition to maintaining their technical credentials, including a minimum of 20 hours of continuing education each year, the technicians at White Auto Body are expected to demonstrate integrity on the job.

One surprising outcome of the positive work culture White has created is staff loyalty—the original White Auto Body shop

in Florissant, Mo., hasn't lost one technician in the past six years. "I hire only the best people," says White, who is himself an ASE Master Technician and an

I-CAR Gold Class professional. "I can teach someone to be a good technician. I can't teach them to be a good person." ■

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Rx for automobiles

Unlike most of her colleagues in the automotive repair business, Valerie White sees damaged cars as in need of healing. After all, her first career was in the health care profession.

A former registered nurse, White joined the automotive business seven-and-a-half years ago when her husband Steve needed help with marketing. Today, as co-owner and vice president of White Auto Body and White Auto Body West, she handles a broad range of duties, from marketing both shops to processing insurance claims.

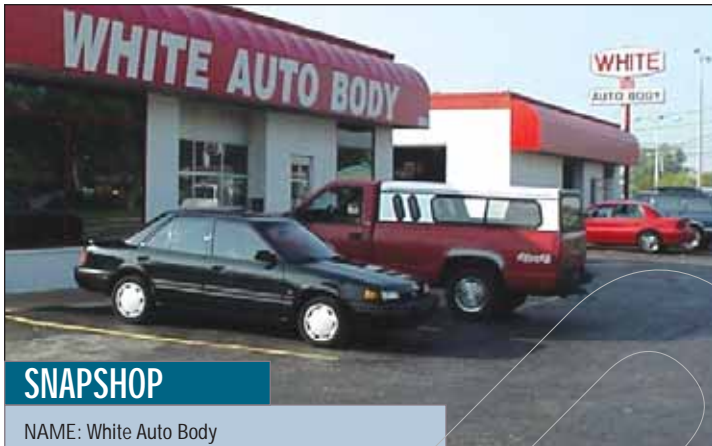
She admits that some customers are still surprised to see a woman—especially one without an automotive background—in such a high-profile position in the collision repair business, which is still a male-dominated profession. "They are surprised," White says. "They always ask me, 'Are you the one doing the body work on the cars?'" But she also insists that she isn't treated differently in most situations that affect the business, such as when negotiating with suppliers.

The biggest obstacle she faces on a day-to-day basis is dealing with insurance companies, but that's where her nursing background comes in handy. "There are a lot of parallels in working with the insurance industry, and that helped me a lot in learning this job that I do," she says. White says the two professions aren't as different as they seem, and her healthcare background has been a huge asset in her second career.

The different perspective she brings to the body shop also helps her deal more effectively with distraught customers. She talks to them in a therapeutic manner. "They're very upset because this is a very important investment they've made in their car, and now their whole world is rocked. And you try to put them at ease," she says.

She also worked closely with her husband Steve to establish an automotive repair-training program at local technical schools. The Metropolitan Vocational Technical Assistance program helps technicians become better prepared to enter the business after graduation. The Whites raise money for local tech schools and help shape the curriculum.

Valerie White's contribution to White Auto Body has earned her significant professional accolades. In 2000 she was named one of Akzo Nobel's "10 most influential women in collision repair." The award is presented annually during the International Autobody Congress & Exposition (NACE) show. NACE takes place in November at the Mandalay Bay Convention Center in Las Vegas.



SNAPSHOT

NAME: White Auto Body
LOCATION: Florissant, Mo.
SIZE: 12,000 sq. ft., with an additional 21,500 sq. ft. at White Auto Body West in O'Fallon, Mo.
YEARS IN BUSINESS: 18
VOLUME: About 120 vehicles per month
GROSS ANNUAL SALES: \$9 million annually
EMPLOYEES: 46 (both shops combined)

the foundation of the vehicle wouldn't be right, and everything else wouldn't work."

Eventually he had enough capital to install the needed paint equipment, but he

didn't stop there. He followed these technological advances with a computerized management system, as well as a state-of-the-art unibody-measuring system. The system uses a robotic arm to precisely measure the damage done to a car's frame. Then it produces a blueprint that allows the technicians to assess how accurately they've restored the car's unibody.

"Picture a map laying over a map, and in one the roads aren't where they belong," White explains. "Visual aids are a big deal, especially when you're trying to convince a person who's unaware of how to fix a unibody-damaged car." This