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In STITCHES

VANESSA MATHURIN'S FUTURE IS INSIDE YOUR CAR

VANESSA Mathurin didn't inherit her interest in cars. "My parents weren't into cars. No one I knew was into cars, until I got to high school." Then she started attending car shows and learning about classics, but it wasn't until she toured Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport that she set her sights on a career. "I walked through the Automotive Restoration lab and had no idea something like that was offered as a degree program, but I knew I had to go there."

She got her first taste of upholstery and fabric work when the 1970 Chevelle being restored by her classmates required new seat covers. After that, she practiced with vinyl by stitching seats for friends' projects.

Vanessa landed an internship at a shop in Philadelphia after her first year. There she worked with the in-house upholsterer, and the process fascinated her. "When I came back to school, I started working on one of the sewing machines, just practicing doing pleats and channels and edges and welts."

She continued in the program and found a second internship, this time at upholstery specialist LeBaron Bonney in Amesbury, Massachusetts. To help with living expenses, she applied for and received a \$2,500 grant from the RPM Foundation. This allowed her to concentrate on the experience, which included working with an advanced cutting machine paired with CAD to create complex patterns. She was also exposed to a fuller range of materials, including leather, imitation leather and various felts. Her biggest takeaway from the two months spent at LeBaron Bonney? "You can never know enough. There's always something to learn, always a tip or trick or new skill to learn."

With her two years in the restoration program completed, Vanessa is now working on her bachelor's degree in applied management, though you'll still find her helping out in the lab every day. In particular, she's working with instructors to help bolster the program and develop a greater focus on upholstery.

As a young woman, 20-year-old Vanessa is a rare sight in a male-dominated field, but she reckons that her passion for upholstery and her current focus on business sets her apart and will benefit her long term — especially in a field with so few specialists. "Because upholstery work is such a specific skill," she says, "I might eventually end up running my own shop, and I think the business degree will help."

Before that, however, she'll be looking for a position at a specialized upholstery shop or at a restorer with an established upholsterer under whom she can apprentice. Either way, it's a far cry from the medical field, which is where her family hoped she'd end up. //



PHOTO: STEVE LEGATO

Vanessa knows every stitch in the seats of her 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle class project.



The RPM Foundation accelerates the growth of the next generation of automotive restoration and preservation craftsmen through scholarships, formal training and mentorship. Learn more at rpm.foundation.

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