

Bill Stasek -

Passionate About Cars

By Judy Nelson



Bill Stasek, right, with CNCC representative Scott Wiscomb

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A November chill was in the air the afternoon I drove to Wheeling to meet with Bill Stasek, the man who, through his Chevrolet dealership, sponsors the Chicagoland North Corvette Club. With a list of questions ready to ask, I was especially curious to learn how Bill Stasek Chevrolet came to be. In the back of my mind I could see the CNCC meeting room at Stasek Chevrolet; it is decorated with wall plaques to recognize Tom Todd Chevrolet salesmen, and Bill’s name appears on plaque after plaque. He graciously filled in the details.

I learned that Bill’s heart has always been in the car business. From the age of 12 he worked summers at car dealerships with his Dad, which fostered his love for the business. When it came time to attend college, he enrolled at the University of Illinois at Champaign in 1965 to put his affinity for math to work by majoring in industrial engineering. He thought he might have a career making use of his technical abilities.

“Interestingly enough, my highest job offer after college,” Bill remembers, “was from the Chrysler dealer in Champaign.

The owner said I belonged in the car business and guaranteed to match my top salary offer out of college in engineering. Of course, I thanked him and said that after four-and-a-half years of school my parents would very unhappy with me if I decided to go into the car business. Although I didn’t take him up on the offer, it was something I have always remembered.

“After college I worked for the 3M Company, where I met my wife. A few months after we married, I followed my heart and went into the car business at Montgomery Oldsmobile in Morton Grove. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life working an 8-to-5 job in a corporate environment. It wasn’t my cup of tea. The owner of that dealership, Clarence Marquardt, also thought that I had a future in the automobile business, so he matched what I was earning as a graduate engineer at 3M. It was an easy transition to make.”

On January 1, 1972 Bill started work as a salesman and within a year became the dealership’s used car manager. “It was a difficult transition, especially for my wife,” he says. “Here she married a

graduate engineer who decided to give up that profession and become a used car salesman.”

Within about six months Bill became uncomfortable with the way the dealership did business and decided to move on. One day a former employee from the Oldsmobile dealership talked to Bill. “The man had changed jobs and was working here at Tom Todd Chevrolet. He wanted to know if I would be interested in talking to Tom about being his used car manager.

“Tom and I hit it off well. He was older than me, but he sounded like a man who did business the way I would have if I were the owner. So I became the used car manager here at Tom Todd Chevrolet in August of 1973. I was successful, and Tom and I enjoyed the relationship we developed.”

In the summer of 1975 Bill’s father had open heart surgery. Fearful that he would never have the chance to be in business with him, Bill left the Tom Todd dealership in December 1975 and a month later formed a partnership with his father and another gentleman to start a used car dealership in Racine, Wisconsin.

months of the venture and then bought a home in Wisconsin.

“By the mid ‘70s interest rates were up and our partner panicked, so we bought him out. Between 1978 and ‘80 business was very difficult because of the Iranian hostage crisis and a prime rate that went over 20%. The money we lost in that business made college look cheap to me.

“In late ‘79 Tom Todd telephoned to ask if I was happy. I said no and explained that I was stuck because my entire family was now in Wisconsin. He asked if I would come back to the dealership as the general manager with the intent of eventually buying the business; Tom didn’t have children who were interested in it. I thanked him for the wonderful offer and said I needed to talk to my wife about it.

“I explained the offer to my wife and said I didn’t think I could take advantage of it. We owned a home in Wisconsin, my Dad was there, and so was my brother. My wife looked at me and said, ‘Well, OK; I understand. I tell you what. Jeremy (my son who was four at the time) and I are going to move back to Illinois; if you change your mind, please come and join us.’ She was smart enough to know that the mix in Wisconsin was not right for me. I really wanted to be a new car dealer. Thank goodness my better half was smart enough to tell me this was something we needed to do.

“We closed the business and paid everyone off. Some people suggested we take the bankruptcy route, but we didn’t. We



Guests galore visited the Stasek exhibit at the 2007 Chevy Vette Fest

returned to Illinois in February of 1980, and Tom helped me morally and ethically to keep my head in the right direction.

“Fortunately the car business started to get better in late ‘82. I became Tom’s partner in May 1986, and for the most part I ran the business by then. Tom continued as a silent partner and a

consultant from 1986 until ‘98. In ‘98 I finished the buyout. At that time, much to my surprise, he was adamant that I change the dealership’s name. I never would have changed it; I would have left it as Tom Todd Chevrolet.”

Bill says that one of the biggest surprises for him has been that an automobile dealer has little to do with selling cars and a whole lot to do with managing people. He spends most of his time working with a team, helping them to make the right decisions about the direction of the business.

“Fortunately, I’ve been able to enjoy the transition to what I do now on a daily basis, which is work more with people. I don’t sell cars and couldn’t if I wanted to. With the exception of Corvettes, I don’t have the product knowledge to sell. My love of cars has focused on Corvettes over the last five or six years. That is probably the biggest surprise to me.”

Memorable Cars in My Life

“I’ve always been passionate about cars,” says Bill Stasek. “My first car was a two-door 1955 Ford station wagon that was very special. If you ask whether I have a car that is my true heart throb today, it is shared between two cars I had when I was younger. The first was a ‘60 Chevy Impala convertible, and the other was a ‘62 Pontiac Catalina convertible.

“The Impala had been owned by the daughter of the chairman of the board of Sears Roebuck. He brought her into the Pontiac dealership where my Dad worked and traded it in for a new 1967 Pontiac Firebird. The Impala was a white convertible with a white-and-red herringbone interior. It was well equipped and just a thrill for me.

The ‘62 Catalina was a beautiful car and fun to drive. It had a three-color leather interior of red, white,



— Bill Stasek

and maroon. It was the first car I had in college, and it was very special because college was a special time in my life. I drove it to Florida for spring break in 1967 or ‘68.

Those two vehicles hold a special place in my heart.

Bill operates his dealership with the goal of being certain customers are pleased with the experience. “We are not perfect; we make mistakes, and we can’t make everyone happy. My philosophy is that we take care of customers to the best of our ability, without worrying about cost if we have a problem with someone. Ultimately, I want to be able to walk down the street to the hardware store or the grocery store and have people who are customers say, ‘Hi. Thanks again for the nice service.’ I don’t want people telling me they are unhappy. I think we are successful in pleasing customers.

“For the last four months we have been the highest ranked Chevrolet dealership in the area for customer satisfaction. We are always at the top, and I’m proud of everyone’s efforts.”

Does Bill have any regrets or disappointments about the business? “No. No regrets at all. I’m fortunate to enjoy coming to work every day, even when it is frustrating or difficult. It has been a good business for me. It’s where my heart is; I’ve been doing it a long time, and I love it.”

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