

SLUG: YOUNG MECHANIC

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MECHANICSBURG, Pa. -- His favorite ride rolls on 21-inch rims and its faded gray-and-black paint job still turns heads, but Randy Wakefield's car sticks out more than an Ohio State sweatshirt on Penn State's campus. It's a 1927 Chevrolet four-door sedan.

His daily driver is a 1983 Mercedes 300TD wagon, affectionately known as Roger. Wakefield has owned the car since high school and performs virtually all of its maintenance. Roger has received a new differential, constant velocity shafts and a transmission, courtesy of Wakefield.

"There's more in store," said Wakefield. "I'm probably going to convert him to a four-speed manual — I have the transmission ready to go."

Wakefield is a new graduate of Penn State University, with a major in agriculture systems management. He played trombone with the Penn State Blue Band and worked for Penn State Farm Services. But Wakefield is a mechanic at heart.

He said he has no clue why he originally attended Indiana University of Pennsylvania for music in 2004. Pushing his thick-rim glasses further onto his nose, he explained, "I love playing the trombone, but I realized I missed the mechanical stuff."

So he transferred to Penn State's College of Agriculture, where his grease-stained Roadway Trucking hat and steel-toed boots blended in.

The Wakefield residence, just outside Mechanicsburg, is an unassuming two-story home in a development. Wakefield winced. “We used to be one of two houses here, but there’s been quite a bit of growth since then,” he said.

Inside, a curly white bichon frise, Dobey, greets visitors. Knickknacks and pictures of family adorn shelves. There’s a piano underneath three pictures of high schoolers — one son with a trombone, another with a tenor saxophone, a daughter at a piano. Downstairs a television is hooked to a Wii. In the two-car garage is a late-model Honda Odyssey minivan — parked next to a dismantled 1955 Studebaker President.

“The President,” as he calls it, is his ongoing major project. It has no doors or dash, much less seats or carpeting. Bright metal contrasts with the dull blue original paint to reveal a recently patched floor panel. Rags, parts and other projects are scattered across the car, a testament to the length of this arduous process. A workbench parallels the Studebaker, with drawers neatly labeled for nuts, bolts, wrenches, other pieces and tools.

A shed behind the house, built by Wakefield’s father, holds two John Deere tractors, a rototiller, two lawn mowers, a garden tractor, and a great deal more tools, all within a 25-foot by 15-foot space.

Every piece of equipment has a story.

Wakefield moved a wheelbarrow as he narrated the story of his 1960s Sears Roebuck rototiller. Its engine was rebuilt as the final project for his high school small engines class his junior year.

With narrow front-ends and narrow hoods, the tractors fit side-by-side, slumbering during the cold, rainy day, mud still caked on the tires from the last wet outing.

Wakefield is quick to show the family's 1948 John Deere model A. "I've had this tractor almost completely apart," he said proudly, elaborating about an engine rebuild, finding the proper original equipment carburetor and Delco distributor, and a radiator core replacement.

Traveling in Roger to view more of his projects at their garage in Shiremanstown, Wakefield recalled his mechanical aptitude from a young age. "My first experience involved helping my dad change tires on an old Toyota pickup. He would break the nuts loose, and I would take the tires the rest of the way off."

He always liked farm equipment – he had a John Deere pedal tractor, an ERTL toy farm set, and "loved to disc the sand in the sandbox." His father is always available to offer advice and help Wakefield tackle tough projects.

Pulling in to the garage, Wakefield mentioned another high school elective: metal shop. "I'll never regret taking that and the small engines class." Those classes, he explained as he opened the doors to the damp, dark garage, gave him the knowledge to tackle his greatest achievements.

The garage used to house a business manufacturing I-beams, he explained, noting an overhead crane that occasionally aids in his repair ventures. The garage is cavernous enough to house many projects in several alcoves and rooms that divide the space.

Wakefield, in his element, inventoried the packed garage, poking around shelves overhead and on the wall, inhaling the unique aroma of must, grease and gasoline.

He pointed out a yellow-and-brown 1951 Willy's Jeepster ("A '50s SUV," according to Wakefield). The rebuild of its brakes was a high school summer project for Wakefield.

Underneath a baby blue cover sits Wakefield's favorite, the 1927 Chevy.

Nimbly negotiating boxes of parts, Wakefield threw back part of the cover to show off his recently acquired, factory-correct headlights. With pride, he excitedly explained, "They only made these for 1926 and 1927. The correct headlamps give the car so much more character!" Showing off the antique, he stuttered when the words wouldn't form fast enough. His family restored the car shortly after acquiring it in the 1960s.

He recounted the summer of 2007 when he was determined to take it to the General Motors car show at the Carlisle Fairgrounds. "It needed a number of things done before it could go," he said. The rod bearings were wearing out in the engine, so Wakefield drove it to his house for more intensive repairs.

He took the cylinder head, pistons, and connecting rods out of the engine. He used all his skills to repair the engine. Custom-making shims from sheet brass to tighten the rods to the crankshaft required precise hole-drilling. Wakefield hand-lathed the engine's valves, honed the cylinders, and cleaned the pistons and rings before reassembling the engine.

"She ran so much quieter and more smoothly and ran under her own power to Carlisle," said Wakefield. "And she won first place in her division!"

Wakefield landed a job as an ag tractor service technician with Finch Services, a John Deere dealership in Hanover, Pa. This will allow him to live at home and do what he loves.

He won't miss Penn State that much, though. "After all," he said, "this will leave more time to spend with my fiancée, fix my cars and tractors, and attend car shows." He laughed. "Rest assured, I have my priorities straight."