



AFTER HOURS
A wrapping party brings holiday cheer to children.
A17



SCOTT PAUL

Bob Bennett . . . "With people taking a bath and coming out of Wall Street bloody, people are taking their money out of there and buying toys like these, and many are selling for unbelievable prices at auction."

Corvette restoration revs up business

Even in tough times,
custom auto work
keeps shop owner busy

BY PEG MASTERSON EDQUIST
Special to The Business Journal

The production of a super-charged Corvette C6 is expected to rev up Bennett Coachworks LLC and almost double the car restoration shop's square footage by early next year.

"It will be a 200 mile-per-hour car," said Bob Bennett, 53, owner of Bennett Coachworks. "It has styling cues from Corvette, but to everyone else it looks like a Ferrari."

The car, which will be unveiled to the custom car media in January, has been in Bennett's 10,000-square-foot shop at 1500 N. Fourth St., Milwaukee, for the better part of 18 months, going through various stages of customization.

Bennett Coachworks is producing the car for Hi-Tech Custom Concepts Inc., Mt. Vernon, N.Y., a car parts accessory company that specializes in Corvettes and Hummers. Hi-Tech will market the car to collectors and high-performance car enthusiasts.

"A lot of people are doing customization of C5 and C6 corvettes, but Bob is one of the top shops doing it," said John Gunnell, a freelance transportation writer in Iola who has written for magazines such as Corvette Market, For Vettes Only and Vette Vues. "Bob has the ability to make the chassis better than anyone and they make their own body pieces so their work is very unique."

Bennett started his custom car restoration business in 1976. After a few stops and starts, he reopened it in 1996. He started working in a production body shop when he was 21.

Known for restoring hot rods and sports cars using custom fabrication and construction, Coachworks plans to expand by 7,000 square feet on a floor just below its current shop. Bennett said he expects to hire up to four new mechanics and/or technicians to keep up with demand that he said could top 200 cars by 2012. His shop currently employs seven full-time and three part-time employees who spend an average 18 months on each restoration. The cost of each project ranges from \$2,500 to more than \$150,000, depending on the extent of the overhaul.

With annual sales of more than \$700,000, Bennett said he expects sales to grow by 10 percent next year. Despite the high cost of customization and the economic recession, he remains

convinced there is a strong demand for this type of customized car.

"With people taking a bath and coming out of Wall Street bloody, people are taking their money out of there and buying toys like these, and many are selling for unbelievable prices at auction," he said.

The shop, which has 15 cars undergoing various overhauls, slowly churns out a wide range of hot rod and high performance cars. Among the shop's current projects are the restoration of a 1919 Studebaker; rebuilding the drive train and restoring a 1961 Impala 409 SS four-speed convertible; and modifying a 1923 Ford T Bucket hot rod while keeping the interior and paint job intact. The work can be painstakingly slow because each job produces a one-of-a-kind collector car, Bennett said.

Bennett "has a lot of real talented craftsman in the shop and my project was very lengthy and involved," said Byron LaMotte, owner of LaMotte Properties Inc. in eastern Maryland. Bennett restored a 1971 Italian sports car for LaMotte.

Bennett also credits his highly skilled work force for the continued success of the business.

"Two of my mechanics are ex-Porsche racing mechanics," he said. "I have engineers, designers and fabricators who have decades of experience and training."

LESSONS LEARNED

BY BOB BENNETT

WHAT GOAL DO YOU HAVE YET TO ACHIEVE?

"I want to run an event at the Milwaukee Mile similar to the old 'Young America on Wheels' that was staged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Something to showcase all the motorized, speed-related sports, while benefiting a local charity."

WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY?

"To produce high-quality work without compromise, while creating a product of inherently superior value. Great work at a fair price."

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR GREATEST SUCCESS?

"Being able to create what many folks consider artwork for a living, being able to express myself in steel and horsepower."