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Future looks bright for headlight restoration firm

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

What began as a frustration with dim headlights has turned into a business for David Hemby.

He started up more than two years ago because he couldn't clean the cloudy headlights on his Dodge Dakota truck. He tried different restoration kits on the market, with no success.

"There are a bunch of products out there that claim clarity, but I'm in business now because they don't work," Hemby said.

Today, he owns and operates Port St. Lucie-based Klear View Headlight Restoration.

"Many people don't realize that the plastic in headlights breaks down over time and a film develops," Hemby said. "This happens especially with vehicles which are not garaged and sit out in the tough conditions of a seaside area like ours. If you park pointing east or west, the UV rays from the morning or late afternoon sun can also damage your headlight plastic."

"It's a combination of things you don't give much thought to," Hemby said.

Car makers also differ in the kinds of plastics and coatings they use, Hemby adds, producing varying life spans for headlights. He estimates that most will break down to some extent after four to five years.

He was considering buying new headlights, but, with his long experience in automotive repair, he decided to try some ideas of his own. After experimenting with different off-the-shelf products in varying proportions, he finally hit on the right combination.

"I opted for the cheaper products at first, but they failed," Hemby said. "I ruined a few junkyard headlights before I got it right."

Hemby came up with a 10-step process that takes 60 to 90 minutes. He applies a series of specific abrasives in a specific order, follows that with his concoction and finishes with a protective coating. He makes enough of his product in his garage to last two to three months.

As a part-time assistant manager at Okeechobee Commercial Tire and Service in Okeechobee, Hemby quickly found that many

customers had the same problem with their headlights. The store's owners were supportive and allowed him to advertise on their front counter, even encouraging him to build a display and using his service themselves.

Hemby continually made improvements in his process over six months and in the spring of 2005, with a bigger customer base building, Hemby invested in a van and the generator and compressor for polishing and grinding. He's totally mobile.

"I knew I had something," Hemby said.

Today, Hemby works at the tire store part of the week and devotes after hours and off days to his venture. He works by appointment only, and expects to go full time with the headlight restoration business sometime next year.

Hemby charges \$89 to restore two headlights, with an additional \$45 for tail lights and \$89 for the plastic rear windows in convertibles. He gets \$50 minimum to do one headlight, which happens more often than you might think following auto crashes when the insurance company pays for one new headlight to replace one damaged in the collision, leaving an old, filmy headlight that doesn't match.

Hemby compares his prices to those of replacement headlights, which average \$225 for domestic cars and \$350 for foreign models.

Hemby serves Vero Beach to Boca Raton and west to Lake Okeechobee. When he goes full time, he hopes to average five to six jobs a day.

"We didn't expect anything like it," said Bill Anderson, president of B&B Wireless in Port St. Lucie. "My headlights were pretty fuzzy and the price to replace them at the dealership was quite high.

David's work came out perfectly."

Hemby has done more than 10 vehicles at Praxair Distribution in Okeechobee. Two were company trucks.

"David restored our headlights more than a year ago, and they still look brand new," said driver-supervisor Kenny Christensen.

Dennis Newman said his headlights were yellow when he brought them in for service.

"Hemby buffed them out and they turned clear again, like new,"

said Newman, who , co-owner of Budget Graphics in Port St. Lucie with his wife, Sandy.

As you might expect, Hemby refuses to share the recipe for his mixture or the exact steps in the process for competitive reasons.

"I had a theory and with time and money I perfected it," he said.

Hemby said others have tried to copy his process but they report that their hands hurt and they don't get the same results.

"If you don't do it every day, you can't be as good as a professional," Hemby points out.

A native of Hypoluxo, Hemby learned the automotive business from his late father, a certified mechanic. In his early teens, Hemby got his first automotive job changing tires at Easy Pay Tire in Boynton Beach.

He returned to the tire and automotive repair business after 10 years at Florida Power & Light.

In addition, Hemby has always liked tinkering with his own cars.

This is not Hemby's first entrepreneurial venture. He once founded a window-washing service and then, with his wife of 15 years, Rhonda, he started an automobile detailing service.

Rhonda is a hospice-certified nursing assistant, but recently quit her job to join her husband's business full time as sales director, marketing director, public relations director and anything else he needs done. The couple is very optimistic about the business' potential.

"I hope to franchise someday, but I need to put in the time and prove the numbers," Hemby said. "I'm going to take it one step at a time."

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