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ON THE COVER

Who would have thought that in 2010 you could get your very own Petty-built Dodge for street duty? Not only that, but you can contact Petty's Garage to see about having them build a dream muscle/performance car for you as well. It's Petty, and it's performance. PHOTO BY RANDY BOLIG

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DETECTIVE RON WIETHOLTER DOES SOME INVESTIGATION IN ORDER TO GET HIS '70 DUSTER

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PHOTOS: KEVIN DIOSI

This story begins in July of 1996, when I lived on the west side of Covington, Kentucky, in a subdivision, on a cul-de-sac street. While out doing yard work, I would occasionally catch a glimpse of an InViolet Purple Duster passing by on the subdivision's main street. I could tell that an older woman with white hair was driving, and I tried several times, unsuccessfully, to get to the end of the street to see which direction the car went. I figured she had to live somewhere in the subdivision, but could never determine which house.

As the years passed, I continued to catch the occasional glimpse of the elusive Duster and the same little old lady, but still could not find her. Then, one day in 1999 while my wife and I were out walking our dogs, the purple Duster passed by us. I finally got a close up look at the car. It was purple with a black

vinyl top, factory Rallyes with white wall tires, bucket seats, and a floor shifter. The Duster turned into a driveway that happened to be around the corner and about six houses away from my cul-de-sac home. The older woman promptly pulled the vehicle inside the garage and shut the door behind her—explaining why I could never find the car. I told my wife that I might have to stop by and pay her a visit one day to see if she had any interest in selling it.

At that time, I was working as a third-shift patrol officer with the Covington Police Department. One morning, while working an overtime day shift, I happened to be patrolling our subdivision. As I was trying to adjust to the daylight hours, I observed the garage door belonging to the little old lady, rising to expose the hidden Duster. I watched as the Duster emerged from the garage, and then saw the woman exit her car and go back into her home. I thought to myself: Here is your opportunity. As she came out to return to her



PERSISTENCE MEETS SPUNK

car, I approached her. She immediately asked if something was wrong. I had not considered that being in uniform might alarm her. I apologized and explained to her that I had a love for old cars and was wondering if she had ever considered selling hers.

With a look of relief, she chuckled and said "Every time I pull this old car out, somebody wants to buy it." She explained that she bought the car new and was saving it for her nephew who wanted it. She then asked me how she could go about getting the "old car tags" so she wouldn't have to keep going to the courthouse every year. I explained the process to get Kentucky's historical tags and thanked her for her time.

Four years later in 2003, now a detective in suit and tie and driving an unmarked car, I happened upon the little old lady at the Dollar General store. Okay, if the truth must be known, I saw the purple Duster in the parking lot and went into the store, even though I couldn't think of a thing I needed to buy. As I was walking through the aisles, I spotted her and asked her if she remembered me. To my surprise, she got a big smile and said,

"Yeah, you want to buy my car." I laughed, and asked her if she had changed her mind. She said everyone still tried to buy that old car, but that she was still saving it for the nephew. I told her that if anything changed and she wanted to sell it, to please give me a call. This time I gave her my business card and wrote my personal cell phone number on the back of it.

Another four years passed, and then on September 26, 2007, I received a phone call at approximately 9:00 a.m. I did not recognize the number, and I couldn't answer my phone as the morning roll call was in progress. After the conclusion of roll call, I retrieved the voice message the caller had left which went something like this: "This is Dorothy Donovan calling. If you still want that old Duster, you can call me back." I sat for a minute dumb-founded as I let it sink in that it had been eight years since I first tried to buy "that old Duster." Since that time, we had moved out of the subdivision to another county, and I had almost forgotten about it. I figured that the nephew had finally received the Duster that he had been waiting for.

I called Ms. Donovan back and told her that I would be there in about ten minutes to look at the car. My mind raced with questions: What condition was it in, did it still run, had it been wrecked? On my way to Ms. Donovan's, I called my wife Kathy at work and told her about the phone call. My wife, being as much a car lover as I am, had only one comment: "You had better not come home without that car."

Upon arriving at her house, I could hardly wait to see the car again. She answered the door, and we began a very lengthy conversation. I ended up becoming friends with one of the most unique people I have ever met. Dorothy Donovan was an 82-year-old widow who was extremely spunky and humorous. She explained to me that she had a bad knee and had only driven the car twice in the last two years. She decided that she was "going to sell the car instead of letting it rot away on flat tires." She told me that she happened to open up her jewelry box on her dresser to find the business card I had given her four years earlier. She hoped that I was still interested because she would rather see me get the car than some "young punk that





would hot rod it"—I had to laugh.

We went out to the garage, and there it sat—covered in a coat of dust, but still looking pretty good to me. She explained that she had come out to the garage on several occasions and started the car to keep the battery up. She climbed in, pumped the gas and it fired right up. She backed it out, and asked me if I wanted to take it for a spin. I climbed behind the wheel and backed it out. As I drove through the old neighborhood, I couldn't believe I was finally behind the wheel of the car that I had first seen 11 years earlier and had attempted to buy 8 years ago. The car drove amazingly well, and the odometer was showing the original 56,000 miles. I couldn't wait to get the numbers-matching, 318 car with bucket seats and floor shifter home.

I returned to Ms. Donovan's house and sealed the deal. She told me her only concern with me buying the car was that she didn't want me to take her to Judge Judy. I told her I didn't understand what she meant. She said,



Ms. Donovan was surprised when Ron showed her the pictures of the finished car and it had steel wheels on it. In her words, "I had to pay extra for those silver ones!"



"Well, I'm old and I watch a lot of television and those people are always going to Judge Judy over cars that break down." I assured her that would not happen, but I did have one question for her. What happened with your nephew getting the car? She responded, "Well, he's 62 now and he already bought another car, so he doesn't want it anymore!" I didn't see that one coming. I had always envisioned the nephew as a youngster who I hoped would appreciate the car for what it was.

I called my wife and arranged for her to meet me at Ms. Donovan's to pick up the car. I told her to bring the camera to take photos because nobody would believe the little old lady story. When we arrived to pick up the Duster, Ms. Donovan asked my wife two questions: Did I get him in trouble for buying this old car? And you're not going to take me to Judge Judy, are you?

We told her that her Duster would have a new garaged home in Florence, Kentucky. "You're taking it to Florence now? On the expressway?" She was worried about the car

making it that far—about 10 miles—and said that she had not had it on the expressway for probably 25 years, and that the only place it took her was to the beauty parlor and the grocery store.

I thanked her for selling me her baby and promised her I was going to make it like new again someday, and that I would bring it back to show her. As I headed home, I couldn't help but smile and think to myself that persistence paid off. I laughed, thinking about the Judge Judy comments and what a neat lady Dorothy was.

A MAN OF HIS WORD

In April of 2008, it was time to start the restoration. I took the car to my good friend Rodney "The Wrench" Lawrence, who also happened to be one of my Lieutenants on the police department. The engine and transmission were pulled to be freshened up. After removing the drivetrain, we loaded the car up and took it to my buddy Gil Russell in London, Kentucky, to begin the paint and bodywork. I decided to keep the black vinyl

top and the original InViolet Purple color. We purchased the correct tail panel that had been previously changed after a minor accident, and decided to make a few additions. I had Gil add a Go-Wing and dual hood scoops during the restoration. I kept going back and forth about which stripe I wanted to put on it. My original thought was to run a black '70 stripe, but I preferred the look of the '71 stripe more. After several discussions with family and friends, I was convinced to go with the '71 stripe in white to make the purple "pop."

Over the next several months, Gil did an amazing job on the restoration. He took the job further than I had ever imagined. The first time I returned to London to see the progress I was both amazed and shocked. There sat my Duster on jackstands with no fenders, hood, decklid, doors, etc. Plus, the car was in bare metal, looking something like a wrecked De Lorean. I remember my nephew being with me as he leaned over and whispered: "Why did you do that to that car? It will never go back together again."



On the day Ron picked up his new ride, Dorothy took the time to get one last picture with the car.

The car was finished in a beautiful PPG basecoat/clear-coat. A set of Plymouth Division dog dish caps and all the body trim was sent to Dave Groh in Delhi, Ohio, to be polished. After the car was reassembled, Bobby and B.J. Reese of Cincinnati, Ohio, replaced the vinyl top and interior. The original dashpad and headliner were still in perfect condition so they were left intact.

Rodney, "the wrench," tucked the motor and transmission back into the freshly-restored body and then off to Ryan Mufflers in Florence, Kentucky, for a set of Flowmaster 40 series dual exhausts. The next couple months were spent detailing all the little things in preparation for the unveiling at the ISCA Cavalcade of Customs Car Show in Cincinnati, Ohio. The restored Duster took an ISCA award for Best in Class, and received non-stop compliments the entire weekend.

When spring arrived, the wife and I decided to go out and rack up some miles. There was no question which direction we were headed in, and that was to Dorothy's house. As the old Duster pulled onto her street I saw a car in the driveway, which caused my heart to sink a little. I knew Dorothy hadn't purchased a new car and I silently said a prayer that everything was okay. I knocked on the door but received no answer. As I was leaving the driveway a minivan pulled up. I spoke with the female driver who told me she was a friend of Dorothy's niece and was staying in Dorothy's house, while hers was being built. She explained that Dorothy had moved to a local nursing home. She provided me with a phone number for Dorothy's niece, which my wife promptly called. Kathy explained to the niece that we stopped by the house to fulfill the promise of showing Dorothy her Duster after it had been restored. The niece said that Dorothy had become oxygen dependent and



Ms. Donovan told Ron that in 1978, a "Wino" had rear-ended her car, and the body shop had to repair the car using a '73 Duster tail panel, as a replacement '70 panel could not be found. During the restoration, Ron replaced it again with a '70 piece.

FAST FACTS '70 PLYMOUTH DUSTER

OWNED BY: RON AND KATHY
WIETHOLTER, FLORENCE,
KENTUCKY

MOPAR POWER

ENGINE: The original 318 was removed and rebuilt to stock specifications by Rodney Lawrence of Florence, Kentucky. Ryan Muffler, also located in Florence, installed a Flowmaster exhaust with 40-series mufflers.

TRANSMISSION: Rodney Lawrence refreshed the factory automatic.

REAREND: 7¼-inch rear with 2.76 gears.

SURE-GRIP

SUSPENSION: Factory stock suspension.

BRAKES: Factory front disc and rear drums.

Wheels and Tires: Factory steel wheels modified by Frank Long, "the wheel guy." They measure 14x5.5 inches in front and 15x8 inches in the rear, with BFGoodrich Radial T/A tires.

HIGH IMPACT

PAINT AND BODY: Ron's friend, Gil Russell, completed all of the bodywork. It's painted in High Impact In-Violet PPG paint. Ron added the dual hoodscoops, Go-Wing, and white '71 stripes.

INTERIOR: Bobby and B.J. Reese in Cincinnati, Ohio, restored the interior using parts from Legendary Auto Interiors to recover the seats and replace the carpeting and trim.

SPECIAL THANKS: Ron would like to thank his wife Kathy for sharing his love in cars, Dave Groh for metal polishing, Rodney Lawrence for the engine and transmission, Bobby and B.J. Reese for the vinyl top and interior, and Gil Russell for the paint and bodywork. Last, but certainly not least, Dorothy Donovan.

had decided to move herself into assisted living. She gave us the location of the nursing home, and we drove straight there.

We found Dorothy in her room. She was still as sharp and spunky as ever. My wife and I sat with her, and told her everything about the car including the Best in Class award from the Cavalcade. She was all smiles, and seeing how happy this made her was a true blessing. Unfortunately, she wasn't feeling up to going out in the parking lot to see the car so I promised her I would come back.

We went home and put a photo album together along with some 8x10s. The album showed us the day I took possession of the car from her, all the way through the restoration, and on display at the Cavalcade.

We returned to the nursing home and took her the photos. As she paged through the album, she paused and commented on the different photos. At the photos of the car in bare metal, she called the painter a miracle man. When we came upon the photo of the steel wheels that I had put on in place of the factory Rallyes, she paused, then said, "You know, when I ordered that car those sliver wheels cost me extra!" I hurriedly let her know that I still had them and laughed. As we sat around talking, I once again thanked her for selling me her car. She looked over at my wife and jokingly said "I didn't think I had a choice... He did become kind of a stalker!" I shook my head, laughing again, and thought to myself... what a neat lady. **MM**