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BACKFIRES

Car and Driver

2002 Hogback Road

Ann Arbor, MI 48105

Dear BACKFIRES,

Patrick Bedard's February article, "Career advice from car guys who have it made," got a group of my friends discussing our love for cars and our chosen careers. Many of us considered working in Detroit, but it never happen. I began building cars when I was a teenager. At 15, I bought a blowtorch, two Citroen 19s, and proceeded to shorten the chassis, construct a full-scale body mock-up, fabricate fiberglass molds and body panels, and install an experimental 2-stroke engine. In my twenties, I went through the process a second time creating a gull-winged sports sedan besides finishing a number of auto restorations. I loved and breathed cars, but I could never get a job in Detroit.

I am gay and knew in my teens that I didn't fit in. I never took an auto-mechanic class because the shop and P.E. areas of high school were dangerous for someone like me. In college I obtained a physics degree and worked on a master's in combustion engineering, but being openly gay closed all avenues to Detroit.

Ultimately I worked in the aerospace industry, but my being openly gay resulted in my being thrown against the office walls by the vice-president of Rocketdyne, bricks thrown through the window of my house, blacklisted, terminated, and the recipient of constant death threats.

Although my talents were never recognized by Detroit, in the 1980s I was able to secure three auto job interviews. I was considered for the position of sound/noise physicists for Nissan engineering in Carson California. At Honda I was considered for their motorcycle division. And, at the Ford Design studio in Thousand Oaks, I was considered for their finite element-modeling program. At all three interviews, I was asked very personal questions— such as if I was married or had a girlfriend. The Japanese manufacturers took me to lunch where they pressed for even more personal information. They were surprised a man in his early thirties was not married. Finally, they pressed so hard that I said I was gay and had a long-term male lover. Moments of awkward and tense silence passed. The interviews abruptly ended at that revelation.

Even with my custom cars, I felt anxious whenever I placed one of them in a car show (in which I often took 1st place). Why do they have to have Playboy bunnies running around? Why do so many of the murals on low-riders (which I enjoy) have scantily clad women draped over the metal? My gay car friends and I love cars, love machinery, and love racing. Why spoil that with oppressive heterosexuality?

Even Bedard's article exhibits heterosexism. He claims you "gotta like 'em till it hurts, hurts your finances, hurts your marriage . ." Most publishers have guidelines that encourage writers to reduce sexists and other restrictive language. Bedard could have

used the term “personal relationships” instead of “marriage.” It spoils my reading of *Car and Driver* every time one of the writers assumes everyone reading the article is heterosexual. My gay and lesbian car friends agree.

And this is true at racing events. I attend Winternationals every year in Pomona. Almost every time I am subjected to sitting near someone who yells out toward the announcer something to the effect “kill the faggot.” My lesbian friends report experiencing harassment at road races at Laguna Seca and elsewhere. They have a constant fear of being raped. Why are race events so homophobic and anti-women?

I’ve gone on to become a leading expert on reducing bias hate. I would rather be designing the cars of the 21st Century. As Bedard stated, “This car-guy network doesn’t have a secret handshake. Doesn’t need one. It just knows who belongs.” Unfortunately, not being heterosexual excluded me.

Sincerely,

Chuck Stewart

Note: To learn more about me or to see pictures of the cars I’ve built, visit my website listed above. May I suggest *Car and Driver* consider running a feature article about the experiences of lesbians and gays in the automobile and racing industries?

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