

## ■ September Business Profile

# Classic passion

## Specialty car business thriving

By Marie Wood

Photos By John Cross

**N**ot many business owners can say the recession has been good for business, but Jeremy and Dani Thomas, the husband-and-wife owners of Unique Specialty & Classic Cars in Mankato, can.

"People came in to buy a classic car because it's a safe investment. They can open their garage and see it. It's tangible. They know it hasn't dropped \$10,000 overnight," said 34-year-old Jeremy of Madison Lake.

Since 2006, the Thomases have operated this specialty dealership for the sale and restoration of classic cars. In doing so, they have provided an outlet for classic car hobbyists in the local area and around the globe to buy, sell, trade and restore their cars.

The couple put everything on the line to chase their dreams. When they opened, they only had seven cars on the lot and six of them were their own.

"They say, 'If you do what you're passionate about, you never work a day in your life,'" said Jeremy, who has found the saying to be true.

Jeremy and Dani have a love for cars in common. At age 16, Dani drove a Dodge Mirada, an '80s muscle car.

"I was the only girl growing up who had pictures of cars on my bedroom walls instead of guys," Dani said.

As a farm kid, Jeremy listened to his dad's stories about the classics — the Chevy Chevelle Supersport or the '57 Chevy. When he was a college kid, he bought his first car — a 1964 Chevrolet Impala.

Both also have experience in the auto industry. Dani worked in auto sales and warranty administration for six years. At Unique, she does the accounting.

In 1994, Jeremy went to work for Snell Motors, where he started in service before moving into sales and management. For 11 years, he worked at Snell and learned to sell cars and operate a dealership.

"He's driven and he's passionate about old cars," said Todd Snell, owner of Snell Motors. "The chances of a business succeeding in its first few years are critical. He seems to have gotten through that. We're delighted to see his success."

### A niche market

Now in its third year of operation, Unique is on pace to sell about 200 cars in 2009. The inventory has grown to about 60 cars in the summer and 40 cars in the winter.

There were many who said this young kid — meaning Jeremy — wouldn't make it, said Dani. Many of these "naysayers" are now their customers and friends, added Dani.

"It's getting to be fun now. The cars are finding us. We get calls that 'so and so recommended you.' We can see the trust level building," Dani said.

Thanks to postings on classic car Web sites, Unique now has clients all

### ■ Jeremy Thomas

**Owens Unique Specialty & Classic Cars with wife, Dani**

**Worked for Snell Motors**

**Studied accounting at Minnesota State University, Mankato**

**Served on South Central College Restored Glory Board**

**Member of Auto Restorers Car Club**

**Member of Hurst/Olds Club of America**

**Sponsor of Busters Classic Car Roll-Ins**

**Father of two children**

over the state and world. They have shipped cars to Austria, Germany, Denmark, Australia and New Zealand.

"It's a neat fraternity of people from all walks of life, but they have old cars in common," Jeremy said.



**Unique Specialty & Classic Cars usually has cars for sale ranging from below \$5,000 to \$100,000 or more.**



Jeremy and Dani Thomas started Unique Specialty & Classic Cars in Mankato in 2006.

And car people talk. They may range in age from their 20s to their 90s, but they talk about old cars over coffee, beer, at classic car shows and elsewhere. His best advertising has been word of mouth.

Craig Smith of Minnetonka has done about 20 car deals with Jeremy. As owner of Infinity Products, an auto parts manufacturer, he is one of the sponsors of the weekly car shows at Buster's in Mankato.

"I turn over all my friends to him," Smith said. "Everybody I referred to him, bar-none, has had a happy ending."

In 2007, somebody told Smith he should check out a Corvette at Unique. From the moment Smith walked in the door, he said he felt that Jeremy was a guy he could trust. Since Unique accepts trade-ins, he makes the deal as painless as possible, Smith said.

"Jeremy's good for the sport. He understands how to put a car deal together," Smith said. "If you're into old cars, it's chasing the deal."

Jeremy also sells cars on consignment for a flat fee paid upfront. In return, Unique advertises, shows and completes the transaction and deed transfer. Then the customer gets a check.

### Sweet wheels

From the early Model-T's to Corvettes of all ages and from the sedans of the 1950s to the muscle cars of the 1960s and 1970s, Unique Specialty & Classic Cars is a cruise through the history of American autos.

At any given time, there might be a 1969 Chevrolet Camaro pace car, a 1955 Chevrolet Bel Aire or a 1959 Ford Thunderbird. Unique's wide inventory also includes a few customized street rods, foreign cars and late model sports cars.

"It's almost like a museum," said Dane Allen, sales manager at Unique Specialty & Classic Cars.

The most expensive and famous car that Unique has sold was a 1933 LaSalle Roadster for \$110,000. Unique received national exposure and write-ups in two magazines. Jeremy took the Roadster in on trade from a customer in Canada and sold it to a collector in Texas.

Every month, Unique sends out an e-mail newsletter alerting customers of the three hottest cars just in. Recently, the 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle Supersport Convertible was featured for \$79,500. Since its restoration, this iconic muscle car was car of the year and best in show, Jeremy said.

Yet there are cars to fit every budget. There are even classics well under \$5,000 for those that want to spend some time in the garage.

### Restoring the classics

Sales is the biggest portion of the business, but Unique's service department can do complete restorations of classic cars, as well as routine service and maintenance.

"We can take care of cars from beginning to end," Jeremy said.

Technician Steve Scholl, who has 35 years experience and was master certified by Ford Motor Company, has worked on cars as old as 1914 and as new as 2010, said Jeremy.

"One thing with old cars – you're never done. It's what's next," Jeremy said.

So what's next for the Thomases and Unique Specialty & Classic Cars?

"We plan to continue to grow, provide more jobs and serve the hobby as we have," Jeremy said. **MV**