





# MAKING THE DREAM WORK

Mike Mancini's American Muscle Car Restorations is a labor of love, teamwork, and dedication to detail

by BEN CHESTER

**HAVE YOU EVER** walked into an automotive shop and felt a sense of anxiety rush through your veins? Work areas are unorganized, employees are stressed, and there is a visual backlog of work? It's a feeling that seems far too common in the industry, even for seasoned veterans who have restored some of the world's best cars. High quality work is becoming harder to come by nowadays, with increasing pressure on shops to churn out the best work in a short time and difficulty finding skilled employees. There are great restoration shops around the country, though several factors seem to differentiate the great shops from the best ones: "It's the little things," if we're being clichéd.

I could write a whole article about what those little things are, but here's the short of it: the team at Mike Mancini's American Muscle Car Restorations have seemingly mastered all these details — and his shop is hidden away right here in North Kingstown, Rhode Island.

After walking into the shop and speaking with Mike for a few minutes, his demeanor quickly communicates his mindset. He is calm, knowledgeable, and keeps a smile for the first five minutes of our chat. I realize that at 44 years old, many of the cars in the shop are older than him, and as I am 29, some are older than both of us combined. How does someone in this age bracket, in the smallest state in the U.S., run an establishment that pumps out arguably the best muscle car restorations in the world?

Like many of us, Mike's father and uncle got him hooked on cars, and a '67 GTO father-son restoration project allowed Mike to learn the foundation of what it takes to properly restore a car. After attending four years of school with the goal of becoming an orthodontist, he realized quickly that career path wasn't for him. He then spent time working at a friend's restoration shop, producing high quality work and building strong relationships with customers.

In 2008 he decided to break away and



start his own shop, building it from the ground up and laying out the space for the greatest efficiency in full restoration work. In 2010 at the age of 28, Mike had the business up and running, with many customers from his previous position bringing him work to get the ball rolling. From day one, the shop never struggled for work.

The first vehicle we pass as we start to explore is a perfect Dodge Daytona. No, seriously — this Daytona is one of just four cars in the history of the Muscle Car and Corvette Nationals that have ever received a perfect 1000-point score. Next to it is a Shelby GT350, which made an appearance at The Quail this August, to be followed by the Audrain Concours d'Elegance in October.

Mike talks about the standards the shop sets for their work, using mainly NOS OEM parts to build engines. The cars here look beyond factory fresh — but certainly not overdone. Cars on the floor have come from Minnesota, California, and beyond, and I begin to pry about how he draws customers from all corners of the country. No SEMA, no heavy marketing schemes, no gimmicks. "They just find me," Mike says.

Word of mouth goes a long way when



you're building 1000-point cars. From the paint booth to the body shop, every aspect of the work being done is noticeably high quality. We stop at the interior station, where the team restores dashboards and remanufactures faux wood grain, the only shop in this space doing so. These cars highlight what a complete restoration looks like, but they don't build themselves.

I asked Mike how much employee turnover he's had since the shop opened 15 years ago, though after spending just 20 minutes with him, I was confident I knew what his answer would be — and I was right. Most of the employees in the shop have been with him from the beginning, exemplifying Mike's leadership. You can tell the team loves their output, and they clearly strive for perfection. While you hear about shops struggling to find help far too often, this is not the case with Mike, simply because very few team members have ever left.

As we wrap up our tour, where everything is organized, the cars are shiny, and the results top-notch, it's the details that make themselves most prevalent in the work. The most obvious detail? Mike, his personality, and how he treats his team, which clearly bring out the shop's best results. ∞

