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HOT

'I'm old school': Brooks still motoring after 43 years at same car dealership

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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David Brooks, left, is seen this week on the lot of Winchester Wheels with its owner, Donnie Stump. The 60-year-old Brooks has been with the used car dealership since he was 14, and the 73-year-old Stump said he will not sell the business as long as Brooks wants to work there.

BRIAN BREHM/The Winchester Star

Up until the 1970s or so, it was common for a person to work at one place for their entire career. Today, in a world of acquisitions and mergers and bankruptcies and consolidations, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that employees only stick around for an average of four or five years before finding another job.

David Brooks didn't get the memo. The Winchester native and Handley High School graduate has only worked at one place, and he has been there for 43 years.

That place is Winchester Wheels, a small used car dealership at 501 Millwood Ave. in Winchester, at the busy intersection of Millwood and South Pleasant Valley Road.

"I guess I'm old school," the 60-year-old Brooks said this week.

As impressive as Brooks' longevity, dedication and loyalty are, he wouldn't have been able to stay in one place for more than four decades were it not for Donnie Stump. The 73-year-old, who attended James Wood High School before launching Winchester Wheels in 1981 with a \$5,000 loan from Donnie Bush at C&S (Commercial and Savings) Bank on North Loudoun Street, hired Brooks when he was still a teenager riding a bike around town.

It was Brooks' bicycle that first brought him to Stump's attention. After Winchester Wheels opened behind the former Gaunt's Drug Store at 1 Valley Ave., Stump said he occasionally had to chase off kids who wouldn't stop riding their bikes and spinning their tires on his gravel car lot. One of them was Brooks.

"He lived across the street," Stump said. "He had hair that girls just would die for — curly, long."

"Now I shave it off because I have a problem with hair," the hat-wearing Brooks added with a grin.

Stump decided to take a chance on Brooks and asked if he would like to help out at the dealership by answering phones from time to time. Brooks readily agreed.

A few months later, Stump relocated Winchester Wheels to a former gas station at 671 Berryville Ave., near the U.S. Post Office on North Pleasant Valley Road. Brooks made the move with him and added washing cars to his growing list of duties.

The new location was a bit too far away for Brooks to ride his bike, though, so his dad would drop him off there after school.

"We used to close at 7, then I'd run him home," Stump said.

After Brooks graduated from Handley, he became a full-time employee of Winchester Wheels, selling cars and building long-term relationships with customers. He also learned how to repair vehicles thanks to Stump's father, George Stump, a talented automotive mechanic who also owned a few local gas stations.

"When I was growing up, I worked for him pumping gas," Donnie Stump said of his dad. "In the latter years, it turned around and he worked for me."

In 1996, Stump had drinks with Carroll Bridgeforth of Winchester and struck a deal to buy Winchester Wheels' current home on Millwood Avenue. Again, he brought Brooks with him to the new location.

"I pretty much run the lot now," Brooks said this week. "He brings [vehicles] in and I deal with things from there."

Stump said Brooks is very good at selling cars. On Monday of this week, for example, Brooks had an appointment with a customer who was coming in but got stuck in traffic on Interstate 81. While Brooks was waiting, another customer stopped by to peruse the inventory. By Monday night, Brooks had sold cars to both customers.

Back in the days when business was always booming, Stump was on the road at least four days a week, visiting automotive auctions as far south as Fredericksburg and as far north as Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Brooks said it was a good arrangement because Stump preferred buying the cars for Winchester Wheels' inventory and he preferred selling them.

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, the values of used cars skyrocketed in response to the prices of new vehicles reaching historic highs. Along with that, many people were afraid to go out in public due to fear of contracting the coronavirus. As a result, business slowed at Winchester Wheels and Stump could only afford to keep on one employee, and that, of course, was Brooks.

"It was tough there," Stump said of the slowdown.

Brooks' dedication to Winchester Wheels never wavered. He just kept coming to work and doing his job, even on days when there were no customers.

Today, Winchester Wheels is doing steady business but not at the same level as in its heyday, so Brooks is still the company's only employee. When asked if he feels ready to retire, Brooks said no. In fact, he seems happier with his job now than ever before.

"We're in high gear, just cruising along," Brooks said. "The repeat customers are what's kept us going all these years. We've got some who stop by just to say hello."

"We've got one family that we've sold seven [vehicles] to," Stump added. "It's even down to the grandkids."

And it's practically guaranteed that those repeat customers will see Brooks whenever they visit Winchester Wheels. Over the past 43 years, he has only missed four-and-a-half days and two of those were due to the death of his mother. That works out to roughly one missed day per decade.

"I don't believe in taking off," Brooks said.

He then pointed to Stump as an example of a person who also loves his work and said, "He cruised past retirement."

Stump is six years beyond Social Security's full retirement age of 67. When asked if he had plans to step down or sell the business, he said: "It will solely depend on what he (Brooks) wants to do."

What that means is, as long as Brooks wants to work at Winchester Wheels, Stump will be there with him.

Brooks said he doesn't see a day when he won't want to work at Winchester Wheels.

"You can be 90 years old and still sell cars," he said, "as long as you can write and talk."

Winchester Wheels, located at 501 Millwood Ave. in Winchester, is open 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. For more information, visit winchesterwheelsautosales.com.

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