

# Making It

## AUTO BODY REPAIRMAN FINDS FULFILLMENT IN STEERING OWN CAREER

By Elizabeth Chang

**A** COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, automotive painter James Howard of Manassas had had enough of waiting for cars to come to him.

James, 35, believed he had plateaued in his position as head painter at a large auto body repair business, and he was frustrated that his commission-based salary depended on how many cars entered the shop each week. So, James decided he would go to the cars: creating a business that would fix dents, dings and scratches at customers' homes or offices, saving car owners time and, by charging less than most auto body shops, money. "I've done this for all these years, gotten in my humble opinion pretty good at it, and knew it was a need," he says.

James and his brothers were raised in Woodbridge by a sheriff's deputy father and a businesswoman mother who had met in Vietnam while James's father was serving in the war. When James was 15, his fender-bender-prone mom set him up with a summer job at an auto body shop she frequented. He learned later that she had been secretly supplementing his paycheck so that "I felt like I was really accomplishing something and making more money."

"She was a wonderful lady," James says of his mother, who died 18 months ago of cancer and last owned a jewelry store at Eden Center.

After high school, James continued in the auto body field and married his high school sweetheart, Donna, who now stays home with four sons, ages 12, 9, 5 and 2. He made good money "and was able to build a family and acquire all those nice little toys and things." But when he hit that plateau, he remembered his mother's advice: "I want you to work hard for yourself."

First, he and Donna "downsized our life." They sold their beach house, Harley, camper

and minivan, and put the cash in the bank to tide them over while James builds the business, which he named the Mobile Car Doc and started last year. He bought a Toyota Scion to take him to appointments, most of which are in Prince William and Fairfax counties, and invested in painting and detailing materials and tools, as well as advertising.

Rosalind Russell of Woodbridge has hired James to work on her family's cars. "It's fabulous," she says. "When he's finished, you'd never know it was hit or scratched or dented

or anything like that." Besides saving time and money, she adds, "the quality of work I would have received at an auto body shop I received right at my home."

At the auto body shop, James worked nine to 12 hours a day, five or six days a week, and made \$500 to \$600 a day, for an annual gross income of about \$130,000. Now, he says, he's working eight hours a day, three to four days a week, and the business is grossing between \$400 to \$900 a day.

While his salary is half

of what he was making in the body shop, James hopes to match his old pay in two to three years. He's focusing on attracting enough customers for a full-time workweek, but can envision someday training other painters and expanding.

By owning his own business, James is heeding his mother's advice in another way. "One of the last things that she said to me was, 'I wish I'd spent more time with you boys,'" he says. Now, because he sets his own schedule, James is around more, and can attend school events and take his sons to some of their activities. When it comes to kids, he says, "you have to be there."



**HAVE DING? WILL TRAVEL:** James Howard makes house calls.

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