

LOCAL CAR RESTORER INDUCTED INTO CANADIAN STREET RODDING HALL OF FAME

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Jim Ryan beside his 1967 Plymouth GTX Sox and Martin race car. DON RICKERS

COVID has put a few bumps in the road for street rodders. The Canadian Street Rodding Hall of Fame (CSRHF) has had to postpone its annual fall gala, at which new inductees are introduced. This year's selections include Jim Ryan, of Fenwick, a longtime car buff who has operated his auto shop at the corner of Highway 20 and Balfour Street for the past 21 years. Before that, he had a garage in Ridgeville on Canboro Road for 25 years.

Also cancelled is the 40th anniversary presentation of the Last Chance Car Show at the Welland Fairgrounds, an event which Ryan helped organize, and also where he displayed his cars.

Andy Souter, of St. Catharines, who is on the CSRHF's steering committee, said that the awards pay tribute not only to the builders of great street rods, but also those who are committed to using their restored vehicles as a way to support charities and provide community service. "Jim's been around a long time. He's done a lot of great things. He's helped a lot of people," said Souter.



Ryan's 1951 Henry J. DON RICKERS

Right out of high school, Ryan got into auto body and collision work, and it wasn't long before he was building street rods. A 1933 Ford pickup was his first project. He was a member of the Road Lions Car Club, created in 1963, which was associated with the Fonthill Lions Club. They built drag racers which competed over the quarter-mile distance at tracks like Cayuga Raceway. Ryan was one of the club drivers of a souped-up 1955 Chevy coupe called Quick as a Wink, and also did the paint and body work on the cars.



His 1941 Ford Anglia. DON RICKERS

His body shop on Canboro Road burned to the ground in September 1999. Ryan lost 14 cars in the fire, along with his tools and many other irreplaceable personal items. Insurance didn't cover much, so his friends organized a fundraising event called "Restoring Ryan's Dream: Cruise-In and Dance." It was held at Bissell's Hideaway on Metler Road, and featured a car show, silent auction, live music, and a barbecue. The money raised helped Ryan get back on his feet financially, and restore his business.



Ryan's 1955 Ford Custom. DON RICKERS

Ryan is a member of the Sunset Cruisers, a local car club which replaced the now defunct Street Machines Unlimited. The Sunset Cruisers raise funds for charity by hosting the annual Last Chance Car Show and Swap Meet at the Niagara Regional Agricultural Society Fairgrounds on Niagara Street in Welland. Thousands of car aficionados attend, and admission fees are directed to worthwhile causes. Some \$35,000 was donated in 2019 for the Tender Wishes Foundation and the David Gregory MacKinnon Foundation.

The newest charity to receive club support is the Last Chance Horse and Pony Rescue, in Stevensville.

“They take in old racehorses and abandoned ponies, that kind of stuff. It’s very expensive, looking after them and keeping them fed,” said Ryan.

According to Ryan, there is a street rod cruise every night of the week somewhere in the local area.

“It’s just people getting together...you can have anywhere from 75 to 300 cars. Friday nights they meet at the Seaway Mall.”

Folks go for a drive, stop and shoot the breeze, maybe grab a coffee or a bite to eat. It’s pretty casual.

All of Ryan’s street rods are still driven on occasion, but he doesn’t rack up a lot of kilometres.

“I don’t drive them to the grocery store or anything like that,” he said.

Walking around the fenced yard at the body shop, one can view a number of restored gems on display, including a 1951 Henry J (made by the Kaiser-Frazier Corporation, and sold at Sears back in the day), a 1949 Ford Anglia, a 1955 Ford Custom, a 1961 Ford Thunderbird, and a 1967 Plymouth GTX. The Plymouth is the real muscle of the group, a Sox and Martin race car.

I don’t drive them to the grocery store or anything like that

These days, Ryan is, by his own admission, slowing down a bit.

“I’m under 100, but at my age my energy isn’t what it used to be, and I have a hard time bending down—my knees give me problems. So building a car from scratch is pretty much a non-starter. But if I happened to come across something that was affordable and not quite finished...well, I might be interested,” he said with a grin.