

'One more ride:' Muscle cars, friendship power Stamford man's life

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... (Bob Luckey/Staff photo)



Nick Corbo of Stamford says, 'My life has been blessed with old cars and Cinderella had a pumpkin.'

Nick Corbo had a 1971 Plymouth Barracuda 383 four-speed in Torrid Red.

Cinderella's coach arrived when she was feeling low.

Nick's arrived just after he returned home from a hospice that helped him manage the pain of terminal bone cancer.

And instead of a fairy godmother, Nick had three guys from New Jersey.

They are friends Nick met during the years he attended swap meets for the 1960s and '70s Chrysler muscle cars he has loved for most of his 62 years. It seems that now, as Nick faces the end of his life, the kindnesses he has shown are coming back to him.

The day his buddies drove to Stamford with the 'Cuda, Nick could barely sit up in bed. Whether it was strength or will or an overpowering joy for life, something got Nick out of bed and down the stairs when they pulled up.

They helped him into the car and cruised his West Side neighborhood. For 10 minutes, Nick again heard the thrilling growl of an American muscle car engine, and felt the rumble of all those horses under the hood.

The fairy godmother could not have brought something better.

Nick has owned Plymouth Barracudas and Dodge Chargers, raced at Dover and Englishtown, and ran a little company that reproduced vinyl racing stripes and other decals. He sold them at car shows and swap meets.

Nick liked the cars so much that he helped the owners stripe them and gave away decals for free, said Erik Sloane of Little Falls, N.J., owner of the red Barracuda, and it didn't matter if they were strangers.

So when he heard that Nick was in bad shape, Sloane loaded the car in a trailer, called two other car buddies, and headed for Stamford.

"We were coming to say goodbye," Sloane said.

"We wanted to do something for him," said Adam Schlesinger of Marlboro, N.J., owner of a 1970 Plymouth Road Runner in Lemon Twist Yellow. "It was probably hurting him, bouncing around in the car. They aren't a smooth drive. But you wouldn't know it."

Nick's only child, Tina, sees what the pain does. She sleeps in a chair next to her father's bed so she can dispense pain killer when it becomes unbearable. Ten minutes in a muscle car did better than that, she said.

"When he came back from that ride, he had an ear-to-ear smile," Tina said.

In the days that followed, Nick's blood counts improved.

"The sound of those cars, the way they look, the smell of high-octane gas and Castrol motor oil -- I could have floated down the stairs," Nick said. "I got in and, oh, it was so good."

Bobby Pontrelli of Toms River, N.J., met Nick about 15 years ago at a swap meet in Pennsylvania.

"He had an RV, and we would hang out in it," Pontrelli said of Nick. "He cooked for us. He kept us laughing. We would meet again at another show, and it was like a family reunion. A birthday cake would come out. Nick would set it down in front of somebody. It wasn't their birthday. It was just a reason to have a party."

Nick's friendliness may be known best on the ballfields of Stamford, where, for more than 30 years, he coached or helped run youth baseball. He and friend Judd Bell of Stamford have organized the Sharkey Laurenno Tournament for 23 years, raising more than \$180,000 in scholarship money for kids in the Babe Ruth League.

"Nick's got a heart as big as Cubeta Stadium," Bell said of the ballfield in Scalzi Park where the league plays. "I don't think there's a kid he doesn't like. He'll go out of his way for them."

Though Nick had those days of feeling better a couple of weeks ago, Bell got a call from Tina on Saturday that Nick was too weak to stand to get into bed, and could he come over to help? On Sunday, Nick was admitted to Stamford Hospital.

A few days later, he was back home, still fighting.

"It's getting close now," Nick said. "But I would like another summer."

It's the season for baseball and cruising -- time with his friends, his daughter, and Linda, his wife of 40 years.

"My wife is a saint for going out in the RV all those times," Nick said.

No problem, Linda said.

"I love the muscle cars," she said. "He bought me a 1968 Barracuda fastback. I enjoyed driving it around town."

Tina feels the same, Nick said.

"She raced on a track. She can even fix 'em," he said. "She may not be able to pull an engine out, but she can turn a wrench."

He bought Tina a 1964 Dodge Dart convertible in red, her favorite color. She's repaid him many times over, Nick said.

"We were sitting around watching TV, and I said to Tina, 'I'd love one more ride in a muscle car.' She didn't say anything, then she got up and left the room. Now I know she made a call."

Days later, he was driving down Stillwater Avenue in a big, bad Barracuda from New Jersey.

"These guys are the kind who help you at a swap meet when your car won't run, even though they don't know you, and stay up late telling stories in the RV. They are loyal -- the ones you'd call if you were in trouble," Nick said. "My life has been blessed with old cars and good friends."

Her funny, generous father has a final wish, Tina said.

"He told me, 'When I go, I want a long line of muscle cars behind my hearse,' " she said.

Nick may have hinted the same to his Jersey friend, Pontrelli.

"He said he wants a funeral on a Saturday, so we all can make it," Pontrelli said.

If one of these weekends you hear a big noise on the streets of Stamford, it's engine thunder.

It's muscle cars driving Nick home.

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