

Collision Repair

Estimating satellites help keep large Silicon Valley shop busy

by John Yawick

Santa Clara, Calif.—Like many shops in the Silicon Valley, Akins Collision Center found itself a few years ago with too much "extra capacity" after the dot-com bubble burst.

"We have 24,000 square feet here and were probably at about 85 percent capacity prior to the crash, so comfortably busy," said Ann Saari, who along with one of the company's founders, Bill Rupp, owns and operates Akins Collision Center. "But when the crash happened, we obviously weren't at 85 percent capacity any more. So we were trying to do some out-of-the-box thinking and came up with some ideas to fill the shop."

Among the less common approaches they took to boosting business was opening their first satellite estimating and vehicle drop-off center about 14 miles away in the Almaden Valley area of San Jose.

"It was actually about two blocks from where we live, so we kept driving past this beautiful, vacant 1,200-square-foot office space on the corner of two major streets and thinking, 'We ought to be able to do something with that nice office at a great location,'" Rupp said. "Finally, I said, 'We're going to get [direct repair] assignments there. We're going to have customers drop off and pick up vehicles there. Everything but production.'"

His belief was that the satellite would expand the shop's reach, bringing in additional DRP referrals and customers by being conveniently located in what was otherwise a primarily residential area.

"It was slow in the beginning, but we got first one and then a second insurance company to think it was a good idea and to give it a shot," Saari said. "It's worked out so well that in July of last year, we opened a second satellite location in Cupertino."

Rupp and Saari said their goal was for



Bill Rupp and Ann Saari have filled the offices at Akins Collision Center's three locations with antiques and memorabilia to help bring back fond memories for customers who might otherwise focus on the less pleasant aspects of needing collision repair work.

each satellite to generate at least \$40,000 a month in gross sales for the business.

"We far exceed that now in Almaden Valley," Saari said. "We're averaging somewhere between \$50,000 and \$60,000 all the time. Cupertino is a little newer; our slowest month there was \$2,000, and our busiest month there was about \$70,000. So it's helping. It was a good decision for us."

Rupp said some vehicle owners are a little skeptical at first as they realize the satellites are only an office and not a repair facility. But Rupp and Saari have worked to make the satellites look and feel much like their main facility's office, which is packed with antiques and collectibles: juke boxes, gravity-flow gas pumps, a Superman costume hanging in an old phone booth, and old Coke machines—things that they say helps bring back fond memories for customers who would otherwise be focusing only on the downsides of needing collision repair.

"Some shops have tied this with just cracker-box, bare-bones offices, and we didn't want to do that," Rupp said of the satellites. "We show customers there photos of our main shop, and they see we're I-CAR Gold Class and ASE certified. And almost to a person they've commented on how convenient we make it for them."

Three keys to making the satellites successful, he said, have been having the space to take on additional work; having the production flow and quality control to ensure that they can get vehicles back to the satellites on time, ready to go; and staffing the satellites correctly.

The Almaden Valley satellite has a full-time estimator, Rupp said, but that hasn't yet been cost-effective in Cupertino. Instead, most estimates there are handled by appointment: for walk-ins, a salesperson is there to gather the administrative data and start the sales process, while an estimator makes the 10-minute drive over from the main store.

Rupp and Saari said part of the encouragement and input they received for the idea came through the "20 group" they participate in through DuPont Performance Coatings. An East Coast shop owner in the group, they said, has also launched similar satellite locations successfully.

"You walk in that room for our business group meetings and you are held accountable by the others in the group," Rupp said. "It's the farthest thing from every man for himself. You're there to learn but also to help the others, too."

Another recent change they are embarking on through DuPont is use of the company's UV-cured primer. Rupp and

Saari said they had several demos of the product in the shop and found that for very small areas of repair, the UV primer may help get a job ready for paint faster.

Akins Collision Center is clean, organized and well-equipped with two Chief frame racks, a dual Nova Verta prep station, and a Spraybake paint booth, and there's clearly an emphasis on cycle time among the company's 28 employees.

"We have four major DRPs, and in three of them, we have the top cycle time of anybody in that reinspector's area," Saari said, adding that the shop was a beta-test site for EnterpriseDNA, a shop production

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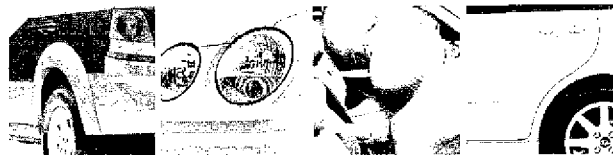
Mike Riddoni is one of three estimators at Akins Collision Center. He's been with the company for about six years.

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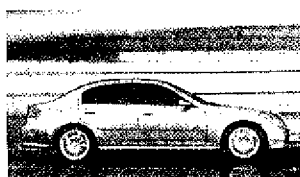
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CAA's East Bay chapter hosts Toys for Tots Model Truck Customizing Competition

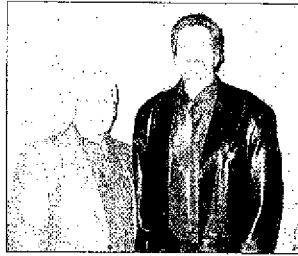
By Ed Atanasi

Concord, Calif.—The California Autobody Association's East Bay chapter hosted the ninth annual Toys for Tots Model Truck Customizing Competition on Nov. 14 at the Concord Hilton. More than 300 CAA members and friends attended the dinner, raffle, and silent auction, which raised money for Toys for Tots and the Monument Crisis Center of Concord.

Sixteen East Bay body shops and auto repair school programs entered the competition. Each was given an identical Nylint die-cast truck that they could modify and customize for the contest. Silent-auction



Art Cortez, a collision technician for Magnussen's Car West, designed and built the winning truck in the CAA East Bay Chapter Toys for Tots Model Truck Customizing Competition.



2006 CAA president Ron Guilliams of Fix Auto in Ontario (l.), and East Bay chapter President Jim Boyle of Regal Collision in Vallejo led the proceedings at the Toys for Tots Model Truck Customizing Competition.

bids were taken on every vehicle, with the proceeds, a total of \$4,400, going to the Monument Crisis Center.

First place went to Magnussen's Car West in Dublin. Second place went to the Eden Area ROP in Hayward, and third place was awarded to the College of Alameda in Alameda.

The People's Choice award also went to Magnussen's Car West, for its 16-wheeler with orange flames and a tilted front end.

The Educational Best-of-Class award, given to the best truck entered by an educational institution, went to the College of Alameda.

Art Cortez, a collision technician for Magnussen's Car West, said he designed and built the winning toy truck with the help of his uncle, Bo Navarette.

"We put over 80 hours and close to \$500 of materials into the model," Cortez said. "This is the third time I've entered this contest, so it feels good to finally win it."

Brake Hubert, an estimator for Mike's Body Shop in Concord and a three-time winner of the event, started competing nine years ago when the Toys for Tots Model Truck Customizing Competition was first held, he said.

"Everyone starts out with the same truck," Hubert said. "So, to see what they come up with is always exciting."

During the evening's dinner, the CAA East Bay chapter honored several officers, including chapter President

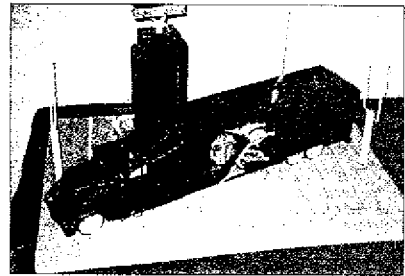
Jim Boyle of Regal Collision in Vallejo and 2006 CAA President

Ron Guilliams of Fix Auto in Ontario.

The organization also gave several educational

institutions money for their auto repair programs. Contra Costa College, Tri-Valley ROP, Clayton Valley High School, Eden Valley ROP, Mission Valley ROP, Solano Community College, and the College of Alameda all received grants from the CAA East Bay chapter.

"It's great when organizations like CAA reach out and help schools like ours," said Peter Locke, department chair of the auto technician program at Contra Costa College. "We depend on these types of donations to keep our programs afloat." ■



Last year's winner of the Toys for Tots Model Truck Customizing Competition, designed and built by Regal Collision of Vallejo, features a football theme.

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Painter Carlos Garcia sprays a vehicle inside Akins Collision Center's Spraybooth.

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management system that helps identify bottlenecks or "constraints" to help improve production flow and cycle time.

Keeping employees happy and enjoying their work is also a priority for Akins Collision Center. The shop holds regular barbecues that include trivia contests and other opportunities for employees to receive nickels for a spin of one of the shop's antique slot machines that can earn them \$5 "instant bonuses" for each cherry that comes up, Rupp and Saari said. Employees also receive a gold company ring on their fifth anniversary, with a diamond added in each subsequent five years, they said.

Rupp and Saari are also developing

a management team that they said they hope can largely operate the shop without their full-time involvement by early in the next decade.

"We still want to have something to do with the business and they're still going to report to us, but we're building our team right now for that future," Saari said. "Which is why making sure we have the right people

'on the bus' and in 'the right seat on the bus' is so important. I feel we're driving pretty well right now." ■



Technician Alfredo Gonzales works on a Toyota Matrix at Akins Collision Center.

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