

Community-building program donates car to help drive women from poverty to self-sufficiency

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The new car feeling is like few others, full of hope, pride, a bit of anxiety and a lot of responsibility. For Caress Pouncy, it means a whole lot more.

"This is truly a blessing," Pouncy said before being handed the keys to a fully refurbished 2010 Nissan Altima during a reception on Friday, April 24, at Automechanika Chicago, an automotive aftermarket trade show. "I feel like the kid in 'Miracle on 34th Street.'"

It was less a miracle than a wide-reaching initiative to provide a woman in need with transportation. The Altima is the first ever car donated as part of a community-building program facilitated by the National Auto Body Council (NABC) and propelled by Women With Drive (WWD), a Chicago-based nonprofit, to drive women out of welfare and down the road to self-sufficiency.

"The No. 1 reason welfare-to-work programs fail is because of unreliable transportation," Molly Cantrell-Kraig, founder of the Women With Drive Foundation, said at the reception.

"Communities have resources to train, suit and get women to the point where she can get a job, but transportation is where that process breaks down."

Women with Drive vets candidates based on the obstacles they've overcome and their proven commitment to invest in themselves first, said Cantrell-Kraig.

With the help of the Jane Addams Resource Corporation, Pouncy got a job as a welder with Midwest Fencing, where she is the first female welder in the shop.

A car cuts her commuting time in half, and will enable her to travel to different work sites at different times, which would be difficult to maintain in the trades without reliable, efficient transportation. It also lets her aim for her next career milestone of becoming an iron worker.

"Now that I am receiving a car, I don't have to look over my shoulder when I walk four blocks to the bus stop at 5 in the morning," said Pouncy, who lives in Humboldt Park.

Being economically limited by a lack of transportation is a barrier Cantrell-Kraig knew all too well in the early '90s.

The Iowa native was living in subsidized housing after divorce left her a single mother of three. Eventually, with determination and a nurturing community, Cantrell-Kraig graduated college,

got a newspaper job, and got a car that not only helped pave the road to self-sufficiency but laid the groundwork for Women With Drive, which launched in 2013.

The overarching mission is not just to provide a car, but to create a network around women.

"Our role [at WWD] is to keep that woman moving forward," said Cantrell-Kraig, who cites that 56 percent of American adults living in poverty are women. "We're not just about transportation, we're about transformation."

"This gift has lifted a burden off me," the 28-year-old Pouncy said. Her mother died when Pouncy was six, and her father's death left her an orphan at age 13. After drifting in and out of homeless shelters, Pouncy spent time on the streets that ended with a brief stint in jail. It was there that Pouncy decided she wanted more from life.

"I wish my parents were here to witness this amazing gift," Pouncy said through tears during the reception. "It's because of them that I have strived so far."

If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a dedicated community to ensure a sustainable future for an adult.

The partnership between the NABC and WWD contains a lot of moving parts. The NABC, who finds and refurbishes the car, acts as the engine of the partnership, and the WWD, who connects the social services, is the transmission; the driveshaft enabling it all is the community.

The 2010 Nissan Altima was a recovered theft donated by Allstate to the Recycled Rides program, which is the charitable arm of the NABC.

"The whole focus of the NABC is to implement and create community based programs where we can give back," Linda Sulkala, program manager of Recycled Rides, said about the image of the NABC. Since its inception in 2007, Recycled Rides has donated nearly 1,000 vehicles to individuals and nonprofits.

Through member organizations that range from shop owners to towing companies, the network refurbishes the donated car and delivers it to a charity or individual. In the Altima's case, CarStar of Mundelein, Ill. volunteered to do the body work.

"It brings our community together in a huge way," said Jeanne Silver, co-owner of CarStar Mundelein. It's their sixth Recycled Ride and is a point of pride among technicians, area businesses, and families, Silver said. "It's a miraculous story of inspiration because you know you're helping send [the recipient] to that next place in their life."

But owning a car is not cheap. Recipients have to have the means to afford a car, which is where the mission of Recycled Rides dovetails with Women With Drive.

"They have to be economically stable so they don't have to choose between putting food on the table or gas in the car," Sulkala said.

Women With Drive reaches out to agencies such as the Jane Addams Resource Corporation that work with women in transition and identify who is ready for the next step to self-sufficiency.

The recipient must be employed to be able to pay for tax, title and insurance. But for the first two years of ownership, Women With Drive and the community network of aftermarket service providers take care of oil changes and other routine maintenance.

Chicago was a logical starting point for Cantrell-Kraig because of the density of resources meant the neighborhood approach of connecting chambers of commerce, churches, mechanics and other services will help scale the program to other cities and rural areas without public transit.

The benefit extends beyond the recipient to the community that served her, says Cantrell-Kraig.

"Our first return on investment is [the recipient] will no longer be receiving state benefits. The second is when she's earning enough to start paying taxes, and the third is her children won't enter the welfare system," she says.

WWD is getting requests for a new chapter every week, and after the long germination process Cantrell-Kraig has three additional recipients lined up, including an Aurora man. The plan is to have 10 cars delivered by fall, and 100 within a year. In two years, there will be chapters all over Illinois and sprouting in other places. "Our goal is to end systemic generational poverty," Cantrell-Kraig says with unwavering sincerity.

As tempting as it is to forecast what's down the road, Pouncy takes a more immediate approach to the future. When asked what her dream car is, she replies with a shy smile, "A Nissan Altima."

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