

# The other woman

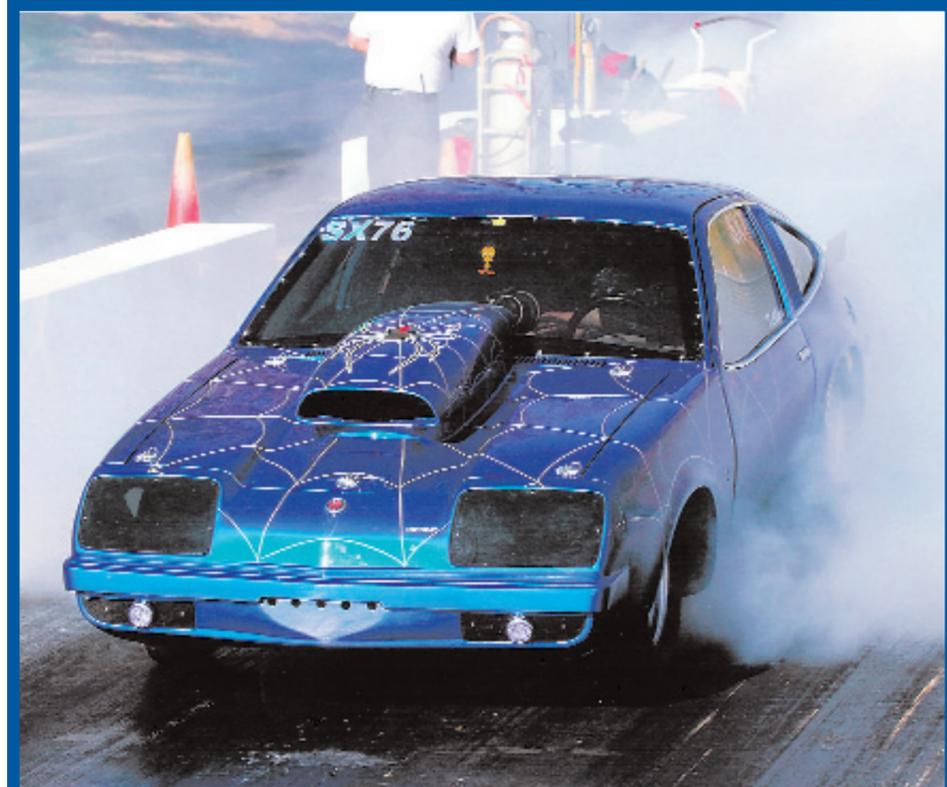
Her nickname is the Black Widow. She's 26 years old. She's got nice curves. She has a sexy throaty voice. Sometimes she squeals and screams. She smokes and she drinks straight alcohol...lots of it. She's temperamental and aloof. For a lady, she's shockingly fast, as in 124-miles-per-hour-in-five-point-seven-seconds fast. Her proper name is Ms. Chevrolet Monza Dragster and she is, as Sandra terms it, Tom's "other woman."

Is Sandra jealous? "No, but I'm just glad she's got four rubber tires and not two legs; I can tell you that!" she laughs. Then she turns serious. "When Tom gets stressed out here at work, he can go racing and that's all over. He just forgets everything. It's just him and that car and the kids." Just about every weekend, Tom and the boys are at a drag strip somewhere trying to shave a few hundredths of a second off of the Black Widow's one-eighth-mile sprint. Tom calls his hobby getting back to "my roots," which he can better afford now that the business has its head above water.

"When he brought her in here, it was a piece of rust," continues Sandra. "It had no fenders, no bumper, no motor, no transmission, no nothing." It took several years just to get the car ready for the track and more years to start winning. Just recently both Tom and Tommy made it into the top 20 points championship.

Both sons are bitten by this bug. Tommy drives his Dad's car now, but has \$15,000 in parts alone invested in a dragster he's building for next year. "So," he calculates, "me and him will be driving separate cars. I get to race the Old Man." He grins mischievously. "I've been wanting to do that since I first started."

James Earl, although he can't drive yet, contributes in his own special way; he has an uncanny knack for "dialing in the numbers." It all has to do with estimated elapsed time....how fast you



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think the car will cover the eighth-mile strip. "Depending on how hot it is and how cold it is, our average usually runs about a 5.76 (seconds)" explains Tommy. "When you go to dial in on a number, you dial in something close to that, what you think the car is going to run. But you can't run faster than that or you'll lose." The car is powered by alcohol which they fetch by the 55-gallon drum-full from a racing fuel outfit near Zion's Crossroads. The rear tires are massive. On a recent Thursday eve, Tom set the alarm clock for 12 midnight so he could make it down to Roxboro, North Carolina for a "door slammers" race early Friday morning. When that alarm went off, he woke up another "other woman," who was sleeping peacefully in

the bed next to him and Sandra. She's black. She's beautiful. She eats out of his hand and she licks his face. She cries the pillow wet when Tom leaves. Her name is Jenny and she's a Labrador retriever. One's first impression of Tom is that he is ham-fisted gruff sort who would never ever show a sentimental side. But even he will admit he's plumb foolish over this dog. The whole family is. She recognizes the sound of Tommy's car five minutes before he arrives home. She'll fetch a candy wrapper and put it in the trash for you. She goes into Sandra's parents' home and fetches her Dad's walking cane and brings it to him on the porch. And when Tom comes home from the races late Sunday, she'll be waiting at the door for him.

With Tom Lillard at the wheel, the other woman in his life, the Black Widow, peels away from the start at a drag race. His best day ever-- Father's Day this past summer-- he won at Summerduck with the help of his pit crew, sons Tommy and James Earl

Contributed photo



## HIGH-TECH, "shade tree" mechanic

Sandra Lillard still doesn't know what she did to make the computer lock up at Tom's Automotive in Orange several years ago. Even the Fisher Auto Parts computer guy couldn't figure it out. So she went up the hill to Prospect Heights Middle School and yanked her youngest son out of class. She was desperate. The entire business that she and husband Tom had built up from nothing was on the brink. Her grade-school-age son sat down at the keyboard. "In five minutes he had everything back in the computer the way it was. We still have no idea what he did." She shakes her auburn mane and opens even wider those piercing blue eyes. "He is very intel-



Above, Tom Lillard (left) and son Tommy confer over a blown fuse, caused by a shorted-out oxygen sensor. Left, this diagnostic computer cost \$13,000 with all the trappings. It is essential to any automotive repair facility nowadays.

Photos by Phil Audibert

ligent" she says of James Earl, who is currently an honor roll junior at OCHS and who ranked sixth at the state wrestling championships last year. "What are we going to do when he goes to college? How are we going to handle this?" she pleads woefully. Not to worry. James' older brother, Tommy can handle it. And if he can't, Gordon Wright, their mechanic for the past 15 years can. Heck, Tom Lillard himself, despite those sausages for fingers, can hold his own on a computer keyboard.

"Stuff like this you've got to have to keep up," says Tom of a recently purchased diagnostic computer that looks something like a Game Boy on steroids. "If you don't buy this stuff, then you're out of business." The price tag for this piece of equipment?...\$13,000.

But that's what it takes to be a contender in the automotive repair business these days. With all the talk of the demise of the "shade tree" mechanic, here's an exception to the rule...a David and Goliath example that you can be small and cutting edge at the same time. And if you take the time to learn the technology, you can do just as good a job as the dealerships, and do it cheaper.

Tom literally started out in the shade of a tree, "in my Dad's back yard working on my own vehicles, maintaining them. I kind of had a knack for it and I liked doing it. I like the challenge of trying to figure out stuff that's wrong. As I grew older I worked for different people and learned from them, took some training, worked at a dealership for awhile, and from there I picked it up and ran with it, because I'm a firm believer--the more you learn the better. Nobody can take that away from you." Amen to that.

The gradual demise of the "shade tree" mechanic started in 1981, when the first computers appeared in new cars. According to Tom's son, 21-year-old Tommy, there are nowadays 200-300 sensors on cars, all reporting to the onboard computer. "It does everything for it; it tells how much gas, how much spark, how much everything you give the motor," he says, adding, "That's why I like older cars; I can do all that myself. I was raised on older cars."

But at the shop on East Church Street, it's predominantly newer cars, many with a "check engine" or "service engine soon" light that won't go out. "What that's telling you is some sensor somewhere is not reading something like it's supposed to read," explains Tom. It might just be a loose gas cap. "We see a lot of those," he mutters. "A lot of people panic and they go straight to the dealership, wasting their money and time. Basically small shops like mine and Clore's can do the same stuff as the dealerships can, but you must

have the computer." He points at the diagnostic tool in Tommy's grease-stained hands.

Basically, the portable unit plugs into the car's computer and reads a code that is translated by a desktop computer. "It won't give you the exact problem all the time, but it will give you the general direction to look in," says Tommy as he and his Dad track down a shorted-out oxygen sensor in a late-model pick-up truck.

There's no question that computers have helped cars run better. "You see cars now with two and three hundred thousand miles on them. Back 20 years ago that was unheard of," says Tom. But he hastens to add, "they cost so much more too, and are so much more expensive to operate nowadays."

What does he recommend to the average car owner? "As long as you do the little stuff, you know the maintenance stuff, timing belts, the water pumps, keep them tuned up, these cars will run two or three hundred thousand miles nowadays no problem."

Auto manufacturers have made it more and more complicated... steering business away from the "shade tree" mechanics. "They're trying to protect their own investment. I understand that. They do that to make it harder for the average guy to work on his car," says Tom matter-of-factly. Simple tasks such as changing oil, replacing spark plugs, and doing a tune-up have become nightmarishly complicated. "Don't dive in the water until you know how deep it is," he cautions the do-it-yourselfer. "It ain't that simple no more. It's getting so sophisticated that you're going to need a computer code just to raise the hood."



Above, four members of the Lillard family make up the core of Tom's Automotive. From left to right, Tom, Sandra, Willie, and Tommy. Not pictured is younger son, James Earl, the computer whiz. Below, Gordon Wright changes out a crank sensor from a pick-up truck at Tom's Automotive on East Church Street in Orange. Gordon has been with Tom's for 15 years.

Photos by Phil Audibert



Paul Sizemore. "I credit Sizemore more than anyone else because he taught us respect, hard work, discipline; 'cause at that time of my life, my Dad was a long-distance truck driver; he was on the road all the time and my Mom worked. So basically Sizemore was a mentor. He taught us the facts of life, what it was all about, and I really respect him for that."

Both of Tom's sons are top notch wrestlers...James Earl hoping that his number six ranking statewide will win him a scholarship to college. He will be the first in the Lillard family to go on to a four-year institution of higher learning, but he will NOT be the first to get an education.

Tom went to training classes; he listened; he learned; he experimented; he worked at the dealership, and in 1991, made the plunge, and opened his own automotive repair business behind the old Orange Auto Parts store on Byrd

Street. "We put everything we had into that little building up there, and I mean we put every penny that we had in it," says his wife of 24 years, Sandra. "I used to be the run-and-get-the-parts girl." Seven years ago, they moved the business to its current cluttered location. There are now seven people working at Tom's Automotive, including young Tommy who has been hanging around there since he was eight and Uncle Willie who runs the tow truck 24-7 and is the electrical genius. Tom maintains a cooperative working relationship with the other dealerships and used car lots in town, saying, "I am a firm believer, scratch my back, I'll scratch your back."

When you walk into the front office at Tom's Automotive, you have to jiggle the door latch just to get it to open. There's an old beat-up couch along one wall, where you can sit and read yesterday's *Daily Progress*. The walls are festooned with all manner of calendars and posters promoting tools and parts. And everywhere, there are photographs of Tom's "other woman," his dragster. Sandra sits behind the beat-up brown veneer desk and peers past the computer. Trash erupts from the waste bin.

"It's a mess, which is fine because it feels like home" says Jean Neale who is waiting on an oil change. "They are really nice and easy here, and I know I'm not getting ripped off. I trust these folks." Just about then, Tom walks in and says, "Mrs. Neale, I'm sorry but you need new front brakes."

Without hesitating, Jean okays the work. If Tom says 'you need new brakes,' then you need new brakes. Sandra chimes in, "We're not going to take a penny from anybody who doesn't deserve it. He's a sweetheart when it comes to that."

Tom is particularly kind to the elderly. He charges low rates for those in the assisted care facility, even letting them pay their bills by installment. "They know they can come here and get their car fixed right and they know he won't overcharge them," confirms Sandra, adding unabashedly, "I thank God every day I married him. He is a great person."

Tom shyly confirms, "I try to take care of the elderly as much as possible because they're struggling, especially the way the economy is." Ask him who his average customer is and he'll answer, "Anybody I can help. I'm going to do what I can to make you happy."

Tom goes to his other office, the one in back where he can get away from the distractions. He stares at the computer and answers the phone. "Tom's!" he says abruptly. Somewhere on a road in Orange County, Jean Neale is driving home in a safer car with her wallet still intact, thanks to this high-tech "shade tree" mechanic.

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