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Born to Run

By Carl Graziano

It was summer 1985 when DCC member Charles Popenoe and a friend "made a bundle" on a Bruce Springsteen concert through a ticket resale business they operated at the time. In keeping with the car theme common in songs by the Boss, Charles and his buddy each used the windfall to buy classic convertibles.

The friend bought a 1972 4-speed Cutlass convertible and Charles opted for a 4-speed '70 XR-7 ragtop he found for sale in Arlington, Va., through a *Washington Post* ad. Charles, who grew up in Bethesda, Md., and now lives in Darnestown, Md., drove the car through his college years, until 1989, when he pulled the engine for a rebuild. But the rebuild was put on hold and the car sat until 2005.

Charles went Cougarless until 2000, when he bought another 1970 convertible from a fellow DCC member and made that burgundy cruiser a fixture at DCC shows, picnics and other events. All the while, though, he dreamed about bringing the 4-speed '70 droptop of his youth back to life - and, maybe, this time with a little more fire under the hood than what came from the factory.

So, in 2005, he began a five-year restoration of the car by fellow DCC-member Tom Lawrance, of KTL Restorations, in Danville, Va. Charles and Tom unveiled the stunning results at the 2010 Carlisle All-Ford Nationals show in June and, even without bumpers (Tom hadn't been able to install them in time for the show), the car still drew as many looks and camera flashes as nearly any Cat on the showfield.

"I am fortunate to say I have realized all my dreams with the completion of this Cougar," Charles said in a recent interview.

The two-owner Cougar Charles bought in 1985 might not recognize itself in 2010. The original dark green and ginger interior Cat is now a custom candy apple red with white interior. Its correct 351 Cleveland - taken from Charles' other '70 driver - has been stroked to 393 and fitted with a full roller cam and rockers and an Edelbrock fuel system, including aluminum heads, air-gap intake and 750 cfm carb. The engine bay also sports an electric fuel pump, Milodon deep sump oil pan, March accessory system with Sanden air conditioning compressor and Hooker long-tube headers.

Behind that formidable power plant is a 4-speed, close-ratio top loader with Gear Vendors overdrive, which provides clutchless overdrive in all four gears, and a 3.91 rear.

Keeping this "sunny day cruiser" glued to the pavement are a KTL-installed, 1" Shelby drop front suspension from Open Tracker and subframe connectors for chassis stiffening. Options include power windows, a tilt column, power steering and power disc brakes. The car's Kevin Marti report shows only 240 4-speed convertibles produced in 1970 and that Charles' is one of

only 35 with this engine and transmission combination for the model and year.

Charles sums up the restoration process for his dream ride with a lesson learned and thanks for the support of those around him: "If you have a dream, stick with it no matter how long it takes! I am thankful for the support of my wife, Smriti, for helping me realize my dream Cougar and my two kids, Rohan and Natasha, for their encouragement. Tom and Kurt of KTL have brought my dream to reality."

Charles, president of a small company that manufactures "SmartBolts," an invention of his father's that indicates correct torque by a color-changing bolt head, enjoys flying small aircraft, sailing, playing guitar and brewing beer when he's not wrenching on his cars. He says he has no further plans for his freshly restored beauty other than learning "all about it so I can enjoy it and take care of it like the precious treasure that it is."

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