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Career Tech Students Repair Vehicle Damaged During Gaylord Tornado

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. – Two students in the Northwest Education Services’ (North Ed) Career Tech Collision Repair program persevered all year to fix a 68-year-old man’s pride and joy, and when they returned the green 1995 Chevrolet Silverado to him on Wednesday, it was like “brand-new.”

Doug Watson was in the truck when he was caught up in the EF3 tornado that struck Gaylord a year ago. Unfortunately, the classic and treasured vehicle was initially deemed a total loss by some due to the body damage, but mechanically, it ran great. Dan Bowers, Watson’s friend and paraprofessional instructor for the Collision Repair program, arranged to have the truck repaired by Career Tech students Austin Johnson and Cameron Cobb.

“We got pulled into doing it and I’m glad we did,” said Johnson, a senior student from Kalkaska. Johnson and Cobb, another senior from Forest Area, worked together on the truck all year at their Career Tech classroom, located at 880 Parsons Road, Traverse City. They finished it right around the year anniversary of the Gaylord tornado, and Watson met them Wednesday to pick up his vehicle.

“This is incredible,” he said after first seeing the restored truck. “I haven’t always been able to afford a new vehicle. I’ve had some pretty nice ones over the years, but today, it feels like I have a brand-new truck.”

The Collision Repair program at North Ed Career Tech teaches students skills in restoring damaged vehicles, including prepping, priming and painting. Johnson and Cobb learned a lot from working on the truck, being taught the various coats of chemicals needed for paint adhesion, among other things.

The two share a love of cars that sprouted during childhood. Johnson bonded with his father over cars when his father got into a car accident. They decided to fix the vehicle together and since then, Johnson’s love of cars has only grown. Cobb’s love of automobiles started when he first got behind the wheel at 5 years old. He got his passion for helping people from his father. If his father saw someone’s car broken down on the side of the road, he would pull over to help them. Cobb said this rubbed off on him, as he now tries to do the same for others.

“If someone needs help, I help them,” Cobb said.

And the students certainly helped get Watson’s truck back on the road.

The Silverado was damaged during the May 20, 2022 EF3 tornado that hit Gaylord. Watson was assisting a neighbor by taking him to get parts to fix his own vehicle. The two men were in the

truck when it was lifted off its back wheels and thrown around, damaging it so severely that it was considered totaled by Watson's insurance company. Later, he accepted Bowers's offer to fix the vehicle damage, which included a dented driver's side door and side panel, shattered windows and a caved-in tailgate.

Bowers said fixing it would have cost at least \$10,000, but Watson was only required to pay for parts and supplies needed to repair his truck. Thirlby Automotive donated paint and the students contributed the labor. An added benefit for the students is that the Silverado is considered a historical vehicle.

While Career Tech's Collision Repair program can provide some services to the general public, projects must fit within the program's curriculum and are subject to other restrictions, such as time constraints and availability.

A visitor to the Collision Repair program will find themselves constantly moving out of the way of busy students, as they move between curtained prep stations and vehicles. Vehicles in various stages of repair, including a Volkswagen Beetle, occupy the high-ceilinged room. The smell of engine oil and fresh paint, the constant hum of fans, and the occasional flashing spark and glow from welding tools complete the environs. In the middle of it all once stood Watson's Silverado, repaired, freshly painted, and ready once again for the open road.

"This truck will go for years and years and years," Johnson said.

To learn more about Collision Repair and other [programs](#) available to high school juniors and seniors in the region, visit [Career Tech's website](#).

Editor's Note: North Ed Career Tech Writers Studio students Alister Easterwood, Dominic Montoya-Arlt, Abraham Murphy, Ruby Short, and Yahir Torres contributed to this report.

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Additional photos and captions available in Google Drive:

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Students in the Collision Repair program at Northwest Education Services Career Tech had the opportunity to repair Doug Watson's 1995 Chevrolet Silverado truck that was damaged in the EF3 tornado that struck Gaylord in 2022. Posing for a photo at Career Tech Wednesday are, from left, students Austin Johnson, Cameron Cobb, Collision Repair paraprofessional instructor Dan Bowers, and Watson. (Photo courtesy of Northwest Education Services)