

Trips with Dad on the road of life

Owen Morris

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Fathers and sons bond in different ways. For me and my dad, it was over cars.

It wasn't always that way, probably because I do not like cars. While I appreciate a sporty roadster, talking about horsepower or cubic inches just bores me. But cars are what my father lives for. If we were to see eye to eye, something had to give.

That something turned out to be the Internet. In 2002 my father bought a car on eBay. Now it wasn't just about the car, it was also about the journey: We'd have to fly or drive to pick up the car. Traveling is my big interest, and these trips were something I could get behind. We'd found our happy medium.

Our first adventure almost turned out to be our last. The vehicle was 1,500 miles away in Sacramento, Calif., and it was undrivable. We left on a Thursday afternoon with a trailer and high hopes.

Those hopes disappeared once we saw the car. It was a 1976 BMW that had been hit dead-on. Bad. The car was white but so rust-covered a better description would have been "bloodshot." My father paid only \$900 for it, but even at that it was clearly overpriced.

The belt way

Still, being on a tight schedule, we didn't have time to haggle. We just loaded it onto our half-trailer and took off.

A half-trailer is not very sturdy. Things started going awry in Wyoming. On a two-lane highway packed with 18-wheelers, the BMW started swaying so much it crossed lanes into oncoming traffic.

We ended up in a ditch and thought we might have to abandon the car. Instead my father came up with the idea of using our belts as stabilizers, a plan so crazy it worked. The belts were still holding a day later when we finally rattled into our driveway.

The next trip was to New York to pick up another junker that was actually drivable but whose hood had the annoying habit of popping open and flaring up on the highway. This happened three times until, once again, my father realized he could use his belt to latch it down. It's the car I drive to this day.

Trips with Dad on the road of life

A dozen trips followed. One to Rhode Island, just to find the dealership closed. One to Miami and an encounter with the Russian mob. Several to Chicago.

While cars are the stated reason for these trips, we both know it's for the time together, too. Considering about half the cars haven't had working radios, we've had to entertain each other. We talk about cars (of course), food, religion, business, politics.

And when we've exhausted those topics, my dad talks about life.

He talks, I listen

When I was born, my parents were extremely young and poor. My father worked overnights at a bakery with four Frenchmen and an abusive owner. Sometimes he'll talk about that.

Sometimes he'll talk about his rocky relationship with his own father. About hitchhiking to Wyoming with two guys on the lam. About the best friend he lost to drugs.

Sometimes he'll just talk. I mostly just listen.

Driving cross-country and listening to his stories have allowed me to get to know my father in a way I didn't know was possible. He has always been supportive and generous, yet the best gift he's ever given me has been these talks.

Now that we're both older, the thought of 14 straight hours in a car is less appealing. I don't know if there will ever be another trip, at least a long one. I'm fine with that. It has taken thousands of miles, but the farther we've traveled, the closer we've become.

Happy Father's Day, Dad. Here's hoping your next car, wherever it may be, isn't a lemon.

Just in case, though, I got you a new belt.

Owen Morris of Leawood is a staff writer for The Pitch. To comment, send e-mail to starmag@kcstar.com

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