

profile of a professional



Mark's Auto Body, Burnaby, BC.

Mark's Auto Body *Speaks to the Environment*

In recent times, the collision repair business has had to undergo more than a few "fender benders." Two major issues have been the environment and safety. Smoothing out the dents has required developing a new mindset and adapting to more ethical, initially time consuming and expensive transitions.

by Dan Propp

Mark's Auto Body, with two locations (Port Coquitlam and Burnaby) has been one of the leading 'vehicles' in B.C. for turning ideals into realities. All painting is now completely waterborne, utilizing Sikkens' latest technology, "Autowave." Why? Because, as Dino Milacic, manager of the Burnaby location explains, "This process reduces emissions by up to 90%."

His brother Bobby, who now manages the original shop in Port Coquitlam, concurs. Their dad, Mark, started the business in the 1980's, back at a time when traditional methods prevailed. Today, Mark and his wife, Vicky, continue to be

actively involved in the family-run operation and welcome their sons' input both from environmental and technological perspectives.

The waterborne methodology doesn't exactly come cheap. The European-developed paint costs approx 30% more than solvent based products! The company has had to absorb this expense as well as spend approximately thirty thousand dollars for waterborne retrofits and equipment at both locations to accommodate this new system. To be competitive, none of this extra expense is currently

passed on to the consumer.

From the latest solvent recycling equipment to enclosed spray gun wash systems, Mark's has gone great lengths to try to protect the environment and their staff. "We've purchased a portable enclosed prep station from Garmat, their latest technology, which has a self-contained,

5-stage filtration system that does not require exhausting into the atmosphere."

"Admittedly," Dino states, "This is all a great start, but there is always more we can do as an industry, and it should be done. Having said that; consumers, insurance

"When I look into my youngster's eyes, it is all worth it. We must think of future generations, and what we, as an industry, can do to make things better."

companies and society in general have to see the value in being environmentally responsible before all are willing to take the financial leap of faith. We could employ much more technology and enviro-



Employees use fresh air supplied, two-stage charcoal respirators.

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friendly practices but it could effectively end us economically, which is good for no one. So we make small positive changes now, and with time and as finances allow, we continue in the right direction."

Fresh air supplied and two-stage charcoal respirators, ear, skin and eye protection are also all part of the new school train of thought that is enforced to promote good long-term health for staff.

Dino Milacic is pleased that employees have generally been very supportive of safety and environmental concerns because most have been trained to think that way in schools. "However," he says, "As far as the overall industry is concerned, it's sometimes been a hard sell in years past for those who have been doing it the old way for so long."

Sometimes, teaching new tricks to veterans continues to be a bit of a challenge. With new regulations coming in from government, and general public awareness such as it is, the trend has been that they are starting to "come around." Nevertheless, Mark's Auto body continues to be in the minority as far as the high standards they have achieved. Being that the majority of Mark's clientele own new model European and Japanese luxury vehicles, "Not only is there a demand for high quality repairs, but most of our clients are quite aware of and concerned with

environmental issues," explains Dino.

To date, relatively few shops offer the waterborne technology. Most are waiting to make this transition when it is required by law. Unfortunately, they may be scabbling at the last minute to meet government deadlines. They may also find that paint suppliers will be overwhelmed as many other shops will be trying to make the shift to this new technology at a time when there is the highest demand.

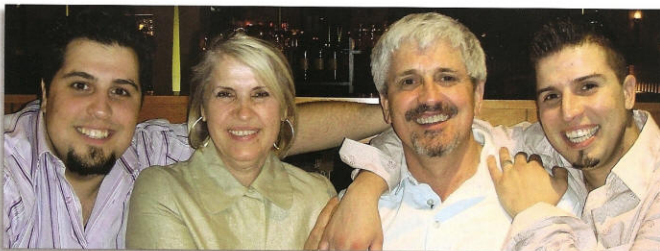
Falling in line with their new enviro-friendly mentality, this B.C. trendsetter has actually invested in hybrids for use as courtesy cars. They've added several Toyota Camry and Prius hybrids to their already highly fuel efficient fleet of new model Toyota Corollas. "The feedback has been more than surprising," says Dino. "We get sort of a confused, hesitant response when we go to put a customer into their hybrid Camry replacement vehicle, only to have overwhelmingly positive comments upon delivery of the customers' vehicles. Some are jokingly reluctant to give back the hybrid replacement and proclaim that their next purchase will be a hybrid, as they are so fuel efficient and quiet."

"None of this has come cheap," offers Dino. It stems from moral and ethical convictions. "When I look into my youngster's eyes, it is all worth it. We must think of future generations, and what we, as an industry, can do to make things better."

Mark Milacic immigrated to Canada in the early 1970's from Montenegro, where he began his career as an auto body technician. He got his start in Canada at Dave Koby Collision and Seymour Auto Body before going into business for himself. From an initial workspace of 1,500 square feet in 1986 to what Mark's has grown into today, the whole family is involved as ever and just as personally accessible. Now, the two sons, both of whom have plenty of hands-on experience, literally growing up in all of the departments, are steering the collision repair industry toward greater environmental and health standards.

"We both got our start in this business by getting handed a broom and being told, 'it's not going to sweep itself,'" explains Dino. "Our dad always instilled hard work ethics into us and it's gone a long way, as we wouldn't have grown to the size we have without this trait; it also helps to stand on the shoulder of a giant too," he adds, referring to his dad.

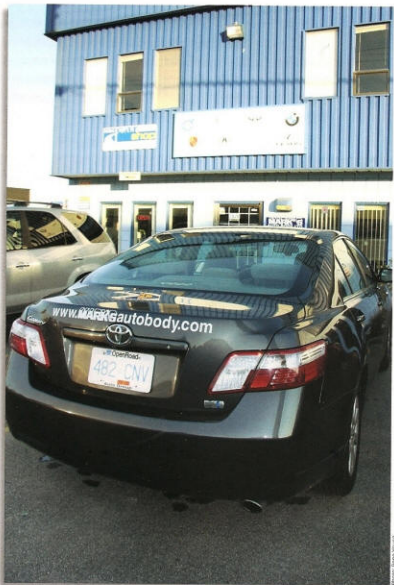
When asked about some memorable experiences in the trade, Dino recalled, "A love-hate relationship between bodymen and painters in this industry, which could get humorous at times. One day a painter decided to surprise a bodyman by putting



Bobby, Vicky, Mark and Dino Milacic.

Photo Courtesy: Dino Milacic

one drop of liquid dish soap in the bottom of his coffee cup and allowing it to dry. The result in the morning was rather comical for the rest of the staff who were in on it. It never happened in our shops, but I've also heard of technicians' toolboxes getting filled with sand. Other than that, I don't think there's a person




This Toyota Camry Hybrid is one of Mark's courtesy cars.

Photo: Mark Milacic

in this industry that hasn't gotten nailed in the back of their head with a rolled up ball of masking tape at one time."

All in all, Dino professes, that this is a dynamic industry due to all the new developments manufacturers release with each new model year. "It keeps this business of repairing vehicles exciting and fresh. Year after year, our technicians are introduced to new repair methods for dealing with the latest materials used in the production of late model vehicles. Lots of vehicles now are constructed of plastics, aluminum or a combination of space-age materials, which really require some advanced knowledge of repair techniques. The 'Good Ol' days' when a hammer and dolly were all you needed are long gone. When we had our first Hybrid vehicle in for repairs back in '99, a Honda Insight, I was quite 'shocked' (no pun intended) to find a warning label that stated 'High Voltage: You will be killed or hurt, do not remove battery cover.' At that point I knew our business was stepping into a different era and we'd have to step up or get left behind."

Mark's Auto Body technicians are specially certified to work on vehicles with Hybrid technology.

From the perspective of a simile, the collision repair business in itself has become like a hybrid at Mark's Auto Body. We are fuelled with the experience and pragmatism of the past, but are keeping current (the pun is intended) with new and more environmentally friendly technology. 



Dino shows us the battery on this Prius they were repairing.



Dino discusses Hybrid repairs with the ARA's Ron Schurink.