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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Lordstown GM Project

Personal Experiences

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Jerad Shuster

Interviewed By

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Interviewee: Jerad Shuster

Interviewer: Katie Sabel

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This is an interview with Jerad Shuster for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Lordstown GM Project, by Katie Sabel, on May 2, 2003, at Jerad's House in Canfield, Ohio. This project was funded by the Ford Foundation.

KS: Jerad, can you tell me about when and where you were born?

JS: I was born in Youngstown Ohio, right in the area, on March 20, 1978 at Saint E's Hospital.

KS: What was it like growing up in your community?

JS: I grew up mostly on the West Side of Youngstown. It was just normal growing up, I guess—playing with friends, goofing around, and just things like that.

KS: Did you grow up in just the West Side, or did you move around?

JS: The West Side only up until high school, and then we moved to Boardman to start high school at Canfield Schools.

KS: What did your parents do for a living?

JS: My father is a police officer, and my mother is an educator.

KS: What is your educational background? What schools did you go to, or what high school did you go to?

JS: I went to Canfield High School and graduated in 1996. I went to Youngstown State University and got a Bachelors of Engineering Degree, Industrial Engineering in 2000, and then just recently I've started on my masters through Kettering University in Flint, Michigan.

KS: What were your work experiences prior to working at Lordstown?

JS: I did an internship with Vinyl Source Industries. I don't know if they even exist anymore. They were in Austintown. We did vinyl extrusion and stuff. I worked in their quality department. Then the following summer, I got my internship at GM.

KS: How did you get your job at the plant? Did you apply? Were you referred? You said you did an internship there. Did it grow out of that?

JS: While I was working at the university, a professor there knew of a job position or a need for an internship at the plant at Lordstown and told me to apply. So I sent in my application and stuff, and I guess through his referral and such I got my internship. Then that worked its way once I graduated into full employment.

KS: When were you hired at the plant, or when did you seek employment?

JS: My seniority date is April 26, 1999.

KS: But you did an internship prior to that?

JS: What happens is since there was a way that I applied, I actually have continuous service since 1999. That includes my internship. So my internship is actually included in my credited service.

KS: Can you describe your first job at Lordstown? What area did you work in?

JS: My first job was as an industrial engineer, but the department was competitive manufacturing. What we would do with that is try and implement and develop some of the newer production techniques that were part of the green book at the time, which was our global strategy for trying to error-proof, to set up racks, different kinds of Japanese setups for trying to get better quality, built-in quality, things like that. That was one of our biggest initiatives, trying to move forward with bringing our production system up into today's standards.

KS: So you never worked on the assembly line?

JS: No.

KS: What kind of car were you producing when you first started working at Lordstown?

JS: We were producing the J-Car, the J-Body, which is the Cavalier and Sunfire. It was, I don't know how many iterations through, but yes, the 1999 J-Car.

KS: Have you changed positions while employed at GM?

JS: Yes. I started off with competitive manufacturing. Then after I graduated I got a position as a direct labor industrial engineer for trim department. I did that for three and a half years, and just this past October, in October of 2002, I got transferred. I'm now a

future program industrial engineer for trim department working on the new model coming to Lordstown assembly.

KS: Can you describe a typical day at work?

JS: Usually I like to get in about 6:30, run through my emails by 7:00 and all my phone calls, get moving on things. Usually I'll have at least one meeting by 8:00. Hopefully that one doesn't run too long—a scattering of meeting depending on what day of the week it is all through the rest of the day. I usually get out of there between 3:30 and 4:00. Sometimes I'll have a meeting that will go over. On Thursday I was at work until 6:00, 6:30. Sometimes you've just got to stay later.

KS: What problems do you encounter in a typical day?

JS: Problems? With the stuff I'm doing right now, with it being future programming and launch being over a year away, most of the stuff isn't super immediate. What I'm working on is trying to do cost studies, cost analysis for which method will be more cost effective based on manpower constraints and product build-ability. I have to do a lot of studies on that. I'm also working on setting up the assembly line, the operator's job instructions for the upcoming model, trying to work on other initiatives that are coming to the plant. I'm also working on general job set-ups, everything from what the operator does at every job to trying to make sure that it's ergonomically correct, the materials are properly place, and that the right tools are in the place for them to do their job properly.

KS: How safe do you think the plant is, or what health risks are there?

JS: I think the plant is very safe, and I think some initiatives that the corporations going in are even trying to make it safer. Really, there's not too many ways for somebody to get hurt with the proper protective equipment. Most people wear safety glasses, gloves, things like that. Proper equipment goes a long way in case a screw were to fly off of a gun. I don't think that's happened for years. We have guardrails everywhere so that no body can really get run over. You've really got to go out of the way to try and do something wrong to get hurt. Pretty much the roof would have to collapse for somebody to really get hurt. I feel pretty good about safety, and we're always striving to work harder to get to the world standard.

KS: Are there periodic drug tests there after the initial hire?

JS: With regards to the salary organization, no. I guess, I think they have the right. If they suspect something they could, but no.

KS: How do you feel about the quality of life programs? Do you take advantage of any of them such as continued education?

JS: Yes, right now. I started my masters at Kettering University, and that's through General Motors has a technical education program, which is the GMTEP. Really you get

assigned an advisor through the tech office. You go through. They try and develop a plan for you, really work around your schedule. The classes are done through CDs or through distance learning, through video links. The tests are all proctored by other GM tutorial employees. It's really one of the toughest classes I've really been in, some of these ones, because they don't let you slide on anything. If you're a second late, they know it because you've got to email it. There's a time right there. It's 11:59 or midnight, they know the difference, whether you turned it in on time or not. It really is a good program, and I take advantage of that.

KS: Are there any other quality of life programs that you take advantage of?

JS: I can't say I can particularly think of one off the top of my head right now.

KS: How do you feel about race and gender relations in the plant? Do you think it's an issue?

JS: No. I think we're working hard to try and definitely equalize where everybody's at or demographically where everybody should be. I know that engineering that I'm in was usually dominated by males, but I think right now the industrial engineering department at Lordstown that I'm not officially a part of right now but work with very much, I think it's almost fifty-fifty, male-female. They're trying to get a lot of different groups in, and diversity helps to get a different understanding about things too. There's people that can relate to different people different ways, and let's say that I can't handle some things. Well maybe a female employee or maybe another engineer may be able to get the point across better.

KS: How has the introduction of robots into the workplace affected the jobs?

JS: With robots come—there's two phases—robots bring a greater quality. Looking at one of the most important things, back in the days you'd get a car and the windshield and backlight would leak like you could not believe. That was because there was somebody there with a cocking gun putting on your urethane. With robots it really helped the quality of a car because you get repeatability every time. Every single time you get the same thickness, the same width, the same placement every single time. There's a definite bonus with quality. The other respect, you're going to get a bad answer with this because I'm an industrial engineer, and mostly that means manpower improvements and reducing direct labor manpower, manpower head counts. Pretty much with that, robots help reduce overhead costs with respect to direct labor operators. General Motors with respect gets to be able to save money in the long term based on manpower numbers.

KS: How do you feel about GM plants in Mexico or overseas?

JS: GM plants in Mexico are very good quality plants. Actually, I know some of the guys. One of our sister platforms is actually going to be going down. I know some of the engineers there, very good people. With what happens down there, even though the employees get paid a little bit less, you go there and there's not much there. General

Motors has to go in, put in water lines, sewer lines, streets, roads, and there's a large cost that GM pays and actually develops the whole area. The people may not be making the big bucks, but with respect to what they were making before the plant came in, that's making a whole lot more than they were. General Motors is able to build up the community, develop something that people can live like a lot of the ways that Americans do—shopping malls, strip malls, things that like that they would have probably never seen in the area. It really is a plus, and they build good quality cars down there. There's a lot of corporations that have plants down there, and it's just a way of life. We get cars from Canada, cars from Mexico coming to the United States. It's the same as Japanese companies shipping in or from Europe or wherever.

KS: Do you feel secure in your position at GM?

JS: Job security wise? Yes. I think if there were some type of plant closing or something, I believe that GM would look first to transfer myself to a different plant or a different area. Now that I travel a little bit more to the center of engineering up in Michigan, there's a lot of opportunities that if something were to happen that I would go in and take the place of a contract employee or possibly somebody retiring. So I think my security is pretty good.

KS: How effective is your local union representative?

JS: The engineering workforce is not unionized.

KS: Not unionized?

JS: No.

KS: And you've never been involved in any of the strikes?

JS: No.

KS: What types of renovations are currently being made to the assembly line?

JS: I don't know how far I can get into it, but we are doing a lot of improvements. I believe the price tag that was publicized was five hundred and fifty million dollars between the assembly and the stamping plant. There's going to be a new paint shop that's going to be built in a separate building. There's going to be major equipment changes in the assembly plant itself, also just some line relocations and a definite general rearrangement of how the operations take place due to some new processes. The new car does go together a lot different from the current car, just some new processes. It comes down to the building quality on how a car is built, that you engineer in quality so that you don't have as many defects hitting the customer.

KS: How does this impact current production?

JS: What we're doing is we are working, mostly trying to work around production, working over major holidays, trying to extend them. We're going to work in areas where current production does not take place. We're building construction walls as we're calling them, closing off the area almost totally from floor to roof—the lower section with wooden structure, the upper section with plastic to stop dust. What's happening is people are working inside that section at the same time as the line's running due to the fact that whatever was there was moved out of the way ahead of time, which is allowing us to do a lot more work without the major down time that has definitely become common in changing over a plant. What we're being able to do is definitely to keep production of the Cavaliers as high as we can while also developing the plant for the new product.

KS: How do you feel about the new paint line?

JS: What it's going to be able to do is help us to be able to put out even better quality cars. I know right now we're putting out good quality jobs, but what has happened is, what the new paint shop is going to give us is, the ability to rerun cars more often so that if there is a defect we're able to run it through and run it through so that we make sure it's absolutely perfect and there won't be as much hand finessing, a lot of more of just, "This looks bad. Let's sand it down. Let's put it through." It's going to work a whole lot better. It also gives us more flexibility in other parts of the plant, and it's just going to be a cleaner, better environment to definitely get us the proper paint job the first time rather than doing it the second or third time that may happen more often now.

KS: How do you feel about the use of contractors?

JS: Use of contractors? Really, there's a process where the union has the ability to bid or not bid on packages, and really with the contractors they come in. They do an effective job at a price that's competitive based on between union skilled trades inside the plant and contractors outside. The quality of the work is very comparable. It's just a matter of how much, how many man-hours we have inside the plant to get stuff done with, how many things we are undertaking. It makes it very difficult with a fixed amount of skilled trades people that you have in the plant now that have to do regular preventative maintenance and things like that on equipment that's existing. We only have so many that you can break away to do this type of construction. You really need to bring in more help, and that's where outside contractors definitely come in.

KS: How do you feel about the future of the Lordstown plant especially now that you have the new car?

JS: Right now we have the commitment of the new car. Hopefully, if the car does well, hopefully we'll be here for a while. Again, the usual things—you would like to think that something is forever in the auto industry, but amazingly two years or three years is there before you know it. It's a very long, strung-out process where the new car coming in was starting to be developed maybe two or three years ago at the beginning stages until now where we're only a year or so away to implementation, but things could happen. You

never know. With the flexibility of how production systems are now, there's the possibility of taking a product from one plant and putting it into another plant quickly and easily. That could be something out there if the economy were to go into a further recession or depression with us kind of just hanging on right now. You never know what the business environment could really hold.

KS: Is there anything that you would like to add to this interview, any information about GM or your experiences there?

JS: I don't know. Really, I've really enjoyed working at GM. I find it challenging. It gets tough at times. There are some twelve-hour days or so that need to be done, especially with my line of work. When it comes to model validation builds or during start-up periods definitely, I work a ton of hours. I have to be there to make sure we build good quality cars and we know what we're doing. We need to train our operators one hundred percent, keep the defects down to a minimum and try and put out the best car to the consumer because I know we can design good cars. I know we could build them. It's just let's get some good quality out there. Let's make sure that everybody knows that.

KS: How have the changes in the hours or work hours affected you? Have they ever affected you because didn't they go from four days a week, ten-hour days, four ten-hour days to . . . ?

JS: That was before I got there.

KS: That was before you got there?

JS: Yes. Before I got there, we were doing two shifts, three crews on two shifts. It was the ten or twelve-hour days with two shifts rotating, and I don't know how the whole rotation worked out. I know recently we changed our production schedule from a staggered three shift operation to straight A operation, and that has changed a little bit how the dynamics of the plant work. I've only known three crews on three shifts.

KS: Well thank you very much for your time.

I HAVE READ AND EDITED THE INTERVIEW AND, BY MY SIGNATURE,
INDICATE THAT IT IS APPROVED.

SIGNATURE

DATE