

HILLSBOROUGH: Search tracks down his first true love: 1974 custom Ford van

By Chuck O'Donnell. Special Writer



Staff photo by Gene Robbins

Chris Puzzele, who enjoys flash in his casual dress, won a trophy in July with a dressed-up Cloud Dancer. One of his "other" cars is a purple 1986 Corvette with glitter paint, a removable roof and a blue teddy bear in the back seat.



Staff photo by Gene Robbins

Chris Puzzele and Cloud Dancer, his 1974 custom Ford van.



Staff photo by Gene Robbins

Velvet dresses, old curtains, shag rugs, old barn siding, industrial foam filler - they all go to dress up the Cloud Dancer renovated van. (Note: Mr. Puzzele says he never takes a photo with a straight, somber expression.) He can choose from a number of distinctive horns, and the ceiling is outlined in 400 tiny lights he installed.



Staff photo by Gene Robbins

Hours of sometimes painstaking work, like gluing each of the faux rhinestones around the rearview side windows, went into detailing Cloud Dancer. Unicorns are etched in the wing windows.



Staff photo by Gene Robbins

Chris Puzzele sits inside his long-lost van with the first trophy he won at a van show in 1989 as well as the prize at a show last month since bringing Cloud Dancer back to life after deteriorating in a New York barn for 15 years.



Staff photo by Gene Robbins

The unicorn was the theme of the previous owner. In recent work, taillights had to be repaired.

You never forget your first love.

The summer nights, the glow of the radio, the open road rushing under your wheels and her wind-tossed hair.

A small piece of her has lived in Chris Puzzele's heart since he last cast his eyes upon her about 25 years ago.

The Hillsborough resident set out to find her again, to check on her and make sure she was all right.

When he happened upon her in upstate New York, however, his heart was broken. The years had not been kind to her.

He rushed in to rescue her, brought her home, took care of her.

Slowly, she came around.

Her name is Cloud Dancer, and she is a 1974 custom Ford van.

It took Mr. Puzzele several months, a lot of determination, a mountain of paperwork, a little legal maneuvering and a couple of minor miracles to find Cloud Dancer, whom he bought right after getting his driver's license in the late 1980s. They stayed together for seven or eight years until they parted ways when Mr. Puzzele, fresh out of law school, realized he needed something more appropriate to drive to job interviews than a white van with the words "Cloud Dancer" air brushed in blue across the bottom of the body.

Reunited — after he found her rusting away in a barn near Lake George — and it feels so good.

"Over the past two summers, I've redone the interior," said Mr. Puzzele, an attorney for a law firm in Woodbridge. "Amazingly, it's a surprise to me, the interior now looks better now than it did 25 years ago. It came out great. I installed a camera. I have a tablet in the dashboard. I got air horns. I've got all kinds of electronic gadgets we didn't have back 25 years ago."

Mr. Puzzele and Cloud Dancer even stepped out on the town last month, making the ride down to the Northeast Van Show in Millstone where she was awarded a shiny trophy.

"I'm not really worried about the trophy," Mr. Puzzele said, "but I was, like, 'Wow, Cloud Dancer is coming back.'"

It was love at first sight as Mr. Puzzele tells it. Back in the day, he and his dad, Richard, had gone to a car show at the Old Bridge Township Raceway Park. He insisted on buying Cloud Dancer on the spot, but dad wouldn't allow it, pointing out this van was meant to be entered into shows, not driving a teen around Hillsborough.

But like Romeo and Juliet, Mr. Puzzele and Cloud Dancer were fated to be together. He contacted the owner and bought the van a few days later.

"It was a love affair," said his dad, "and no one could stand in the way. All I remember is him driving around all the time with his two best buddies."

His son taught himself how to wire the van, adding hundreds of lights inside and a few extra horns under the hood. The crushed red velvet interior and stained glass accents appealed to his ostentatious tastes.

He reluctantly let her go seven or eight years later, but never forgot her. How could he?

"Whenever I would run into someone I knew from high school," Mr. Puzzele said, "They would ask, 'How is Cloud Dancer? What happened to Cloud Dancer?' They didn't care how I was doing."

Finding her proved to be a long and often frustrating odyssey. Google searches were fruitless. The Motor Vehicle Commission was of no help. A couple of private investigators he had worked with previously couldn't even get a lead on her.

He finally got a break when a kind lady at the insurance company agreed to crawl up into an attic — despite having a cast on her broken arm — to locate the original paperwork on Cloud Dancer. A week later, Mr. Puzzele had the original vehicle identification number.

Mr. Puzzele used the VIN and an ambiguously written law originally created for car dealerships to follow the performance of a vehicle that had been modified to get the state's records of the van. The bad news was he apparently had sold the van to someone who lived in another state.

So he navigated similar laws in Pennsylvania and Connecticut with no luck. But New York was a different story. He found the owner. Before long, a man living upstate invited Mr. Puzzele to see Cloud Dancer.

"It was sitting in a barn, and it hadn't been moved in a million years," Mr. Puzzele said.

Her white exterior had been covered over by a coat of black with a sparkly finish. The once lavish interior had become home to raccoons, mice and bugs.

Mr. Puzzele went up to see the van a few more times. He got her out of the barn, started her up and drove her slowly around a field on the property.

"Half my friends said I was crazy if I bought her back," Mr. Puzzele said, "and half said I was crazy not to."

He decided she needed to be with him and hauled her back home.

Mr. Puzzele would work for hours on restoring her. When it got cold, he ran an extension cord and hooked up a portable heater in his garage.

He didn't have a big budget so he would get creative. He used pennies and some industrial-strength glue to fill the holes in the floor. He used a red velvet girls dress he bought at a flea market for \$1 to reupholster the dashboard. He also added a tablet and a GPS to the dashboard and replaced the stained glass taillights in the back.

What he couldn't fix, he found help. When Mr. Puzzele's story began to circulate around the tight-knit community of van enthusiasts, known as vanners, they came to his home to check under the hood. Incredibly, Cloud Dancer didn't need any major work.

"I began to hear from vanners from around the world, who, just like me, were looking for their vans," Mr. Puzzele said.

Mr. Puzzele said she's still a work in progress, but he's never going to let Cloud Dancer go again.

"It just didn't make sense as ridiculous as it sounds to have this custom 1970s van that had been in magazines and had been driven around the country just to sit in a barn and rot," he said. "I just couldn't do it. Plus we're talking about approximately \$1,000 to get this thing back. For \$1,000, I've done dumber things."

"It was just a matter of do I let this thing rot in a barn and have some regrets or do I bring it home and try to have some fun with it."

For more about Mr. Puzzele and Cloud Dancer, log on to:

<http://www.puzzele.com/clouddancer/clouddancer.htm>.