

Profile: Dan Hosbrook and Judie Brill, proprietors of Hosbrook Motors in Blue Ash

Article theme/focus: Dan Hosbrook is the owner of a small automotive service business that has been in his family and on the same corner in the city of Blue Ash since 1927. The times change, as does the city, but Dan and Hosbrook Motors do not. A monument to both Cincinnati and family history, the business is filled with kitsch and memorabilia that is to some amusing, to others an eyesore. Dan should be enjoying his golden years and the city of Blue Ash agrees and is eager to redevelop the land Dan owns. But Dan isn't quite ready to retire or sell, and the words "eminent domain" have been more than whispered. Dan's not going to stand for that.

Word Count: 1584

When you first enter the customer area of Hosbrook Motors service station, your senses will, undoubtedly, be tickled. You might even be left a little dizzy. The office holds decades worth of memorabilia: Visitors are greeted by a mounted antelope head, a little mangy from age, keeping watch over the front door and adorned with several strands of patriotic garland, little red stars woven about its neck and antlers. To the left of the door sits a 1960s-era Gulf gas pump, in mint condition, its cents-per-gallon window frozen permanently at 27 (a remnant from a time when the station still sold gas), near a strip of three red-lacquered seats from the old Crosley Field. On the wall to the right of the door, a collage of photos consumes an area of nearly 20 square feet and features a yellowed and thumb tack-stuck fortune cookie fortune: "Tis better to live rich than to die rich," it reads. The place carries an organic aroma – a mix, maybe, of motor oil, dry paper and stale coffee.

It may take a few moments before you even notice the man seated behind the elevated desk, proprietor Dan Hosbrook. Hosbrook is a big teddy bear of a man, a 63-year old with graying sandy-blond hair, thick eyebrows poised above strong blue eyes and a warm smile. He wears suspenders over the slate-blue work shirt that has his name embroidered on a patch above

his heart. This business has been in Hosbrook's family since 1927, when his father, Harlan Hosbrook, opened a service station at the corner of Kenwood and Cooper roads in Blue Ash.

And to be sure, the business has seen numerous changes over the years. Hosbrook and his wife Judie Brill are the only employees left. Hosbrook prefers not to deal with the hassles that often accompany employees, and this way Brill can smoke freely in the workplace. Their shared love of collectibles and kitsch, a strong community of friends and customers and a fierce independent streak keep them going. That's important because the corner Hosbrook Motors is located on is a prime piece of real estate, smack in the middle of what Blue Ash hopes will one day be its village centerpiece. And according to Hosbrook, the city of Blue Ash has been eyeing the property for nearly 20 years. "It would be a great location for a couple of nice restaurants," Marvin Thompson, former city manager, has said of the three-acre parcel.

But despite constant visits by numerous "slick, wheeler-dealer" developer types, Hosbrook isn't interested in selling. He isn't interested in selling despite the property's market value of more than \$2 million. And he isn't interested in selling despite the fact that some of his neighbors and the city have targeted him and his business, complaining it doesn't fit in with the rest of the city, that it is an unattractive mess that is holding up progress. Neighbor Hal Silverman, owner and developer of the four-story glittering glass US Bank building across the street, "has called it a junkyard and an eyesore," Hosbrook says.

It's obvious that words like junkyard and eyesore sting. "But I can't throw anything out," Hosbrook says. "It's genetic." When he says this, it's not a concession, merely a statement of fact. "Now this here is one of my favorite treasures," Hosbrook says, distracted by another item he just has to share with his guests. He picks up a very old and almost crumbling copy of Playboy magazine – but not just any copy. This is a Braille Playboy. He chuckles at the absurdity

of it. On the wall behind his desk hangs an iron jail-cell door, a relic from Cincinnati's old justice center, adorned with a monstrous rubber Halloween mask. His collecting follows no specific path, instead revealing a penchant for amassing treasures that suit his fancy or that of his wife.

"It's the hunt," Brill says of their shared obsession for collecting. These accumulated treasures and hundreds more, some purchased at auctions and flea markets, and many more given as gifts, can tell a thousand stories. The one that tells the most is a photo album – a rather unassuming-looking one that is filled with snapshots depicting a family legacy that spans nearly 150 years and three villages in the Blue Ash area. Much of the Blue Ash-Madeira area was once a part of the Hosbrook homestead, dating back to the 1860s, from just north of the little one-story station at the corner of Kenwood and Cooper to the road named for Hosbrook's family off Madeira and Kenwood's Euclid Avenue.

Silverman, for his part, has said only that he hopes for Blue Ash to be more than what it currently is. His vision, shared by city officials, is for a city center that more greatly resembles that of Hyde Park: a pedestrian area where people walk, dine, shop and live. But without the cooperation of Hosbrook and a few other holdouts, that vision may have a difficult time coming to fruition. Or will it? Thompson has been quoted saying that the city wouldn't hesitate to take properties through eminent domain, and that, Brill says, "puts us right in the soup." She fears "infringement upon our personal rights."

But Hosbrook and Brill are rabble-rousers, and they know a lot about civic laws and open meeting laws. They almost never miss a city council or planning meeting. They are sure their recent efforts to prevent the city from relocating a popular war memorial have further alienated them from city officials. But they also note they are on a first-name basis with lawyers from the Institute of Justice, a civil liberties law firm that won an Ohio Supreme Court victory for

homeowners fighting eminent domain in Norwood in 2006. “Power is tough,” Brill says. “Unless it is kicking you in the teeth, people are oblivious to it.”

Friends, customers and acquaintances don’t seem to notice or care that the service station lacks “the right look,” based on the vast amount of time they spend just shooting the breeze and helping themselves to coffee with Hosbrook and Brill. It’s a wonder that Hosbrook gets any work done. Frequent patron Russell Maxfield isn’t terribly likely to stay for coffee, but he will linger when he stops to pick up his car, fresh from an oil change. He and Hosbrook share pleasantries about their families. Maxfield recounts the latest on his wife’s health problems, which for some reason functions as a transition for the men to switch to a new topic of conversation: inappropriate jokes of a vaudevillian nature.

In Hosbrook’s garage, a functioning traffic light hangs from the ceiling, one of those auction finds Brill mentioned. Also hanging from the ceiling are several model airplanes. The walls are plastered with related signs: low-flying aircraft, flight lessons, and hangar ahead, all in homage not only to one of Hosbrook’s favorite subjects but also to the local Blue Ash airport. Of course there are the requisite auto parts and collectibles as well. The front passenger side fender of a 1960s corvette clings to one wall of the garage, near a window that faces out to Kenwood Road and with a view of Starbucks. Only a real gear head would know what that is, Brill insists.

And those gear heads, along with plenty of non-enthusiasts, enjoys just hanging around the shop, with Hosbrook and Brill holding court. Hosbrook has known many of these men for 40 and 50 years, and the laughter and conversation flows easily, as does the coffee. A box of donuts sits among dozens of auto parts catalogs and countless loose papers on Hosbrook’s counter area. Today’s topic of conversation is the recent presidential election, and consensus indicates the gang is ready for change. If this were a Friday morning, the motley crew might be engaged in

what Hosbrook refers to as the international coffee klatch. “I think the group of us, we could solve all the world’s problems,” he suggests, adding that the group of regulars includes men of Indian, Middle Eastern and Jewish descent, their friendships cultivated over coffee and donuts. “He’s a treasure – the kind of guy you don’t meet often,” offers Hosbrook of one of his long-time friends and loyal customers.

In the photo collage on the wall, Hosbrook visits car and boat shows, rides a motorcycle and sits in a big rig; over here are Hosbrook and friends on hunting and fishing trips; there he is embracing his wife, his niece and his friends; over there he is on vacation, scaling the face of a rock cliff in Utah or Arizona, all red rocks and craggy outcroppings. His favorite is a photo of him with his young grandsons, Paul and Marc. After they were born, Hosbrook put a new sign in the window of his shop: “Hosbrook and Grandsons,” it reads. It would be a dream fulfilled, he says, for his grandsons to someday play a role in this business.

And besides, could anyone imagine this man anywhere but here? After more than 140 years of Hosbrooks owning this land, can’t local officials understand Hosbrook’s attachment to this place? For now, he will stay here, at the corner of Kenwood and Cooper, choosing to live a life rich in friends, family and history, rather than the riches that would befall him if he gave in to the city’s wishes. “My family spent our lives here,” Hosbrook says. “I think it should be my right to go when I want to go.”