

Car show motors into 30th year

The Advocate of Westminster and Finksburg

May 10, 2011

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Photo By Brett Lake

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John Davis, center, executive producer and host of "MotorWeek" hosts a podcast session with Steven Chupnick, left, and Brian Robinson, right, May 4, at Maryland Public Television in Owings Mills. The weekly automobile series is celebrating its 30th year.

For 30 years, "MotorWeek" has been a staple of Maryland Public Television programming reaching living rooms across the country.

The automobile tests conducted on the show are now featured on YouTube and popular automobile website cars.com, as the videos have become a must-see before making an automobile purchase.

Finksburg resident John Davis, executive producer and host, said he shaped the program's format to resemble popular automobile magazines including: Car and Driver, Motor Trend and Road & Track.

"We knew that we wanted to try to do something about automobiles that had not been done on television before," Davis said. "But do it in a way that was less jargon that would appeal to a wider audience."

The first episode aired in Oct. 1981 on the Maryland Public Television station, in Owings Mills, with a slew of automobile comparisons, reviews, news and features. The show and its format have gone uninterrupted ever since.

"We were unique at the beginning, and now were still unique," said Davis, 33-years-old when the first episode aired. "For good or for bad we've sort of stuck to an old-fashioned formula."

Davis, now 63, said that creating a show 30 years ago is a world's difference from today's television programs.

"Public television in those days you could start rough and refine yourself and people weren't disappointed," Davis said. "I'm not sure I would've gotten away with it today."

Davis also would've never thought the day would come that "MotorWeek" was celebrating 30 years in television.

"I think those of us that have been around since the beginning thought five years is a long time for TV, and 30 years is an eternity," Davis said.

The first show was aired on 70 stations along the East Coast. Shortly after, "MotorWeek" had an audience that stretched from coast to coast. Davis credits the success of the show to people's perpetual fascination with the automobile, coupled with the direct and knowledgeable format the show uses.

The show uses the Md. 75-80 dragway in Mount Airy to conduct the testing of vehicles. Each week a new car, truck or SUV is tested. The 10 full-time staffers for "MotorWeek" each help with every aspect of the production. They all conduct tests on the car of the week, and offer insight for the broadcast.

On the "MotorWeek" set, a writer may also be the driver, and an editor may also serve as the videographer all on the same episode.

"The only way we've managed to do a big show on a small budget is to have a lot of people that were multi-talented and willing to try new things," Davis said.

Michelle Parker, who's been working on the show for more than three years, mainly serves as the public relations manager, but also coordinates weekly podcasts and the show's social media outlets.

"It's a massive undertaking every week," Parker said. "And somehow, somehow, everyone comes together, pulls together and gets it on air."

Brian Robinson, who lives in Westminster, has worked on the show for 15 years. Robinson has worked the majority of his tenure as a reporter for the show, conducting automobile tests, but recently began contributing more writing.

"It's one of the cool things about this place," he said. "No one has a specific assigned job where they do that every day and that's all they do. Everyone kind of pitches in and does a little bit of everything."

The show is now aired on 93 percent of the Public Broadcasting System stations and is television's longest running automotive series.

"Once you get television in your blood, it's hard to get it out," Davis said.

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