

Adam Anderson: Dragon Slayer and Orchid Zen Master



Orchid grower and ASE-certified master technician Adam Anderson holds a Laeliocattleya Fire Dancer 'Patricia' orchid from his 1000-strong collection.

If you need someone to slay dragons under the hood of your Volvo, meet ASE-certified master technician Adam Anderson whose credentials are as shiny as the metal piercing fixed in his left ear.

A thatch of dark hair, rowan-red cheeks, muscular arms, and a robust physique describes Adam as he bends under an elevated chassis to solder a part with his blue-flamed blow torch, or as he musters muscle to remove and later reinstall wheels and then tighten the lug nuts that keep them in place.

With a warrior's focus, he swiftly eviscerates entire vehicles as he searches out the source of oil leaks, burning smells, squeaks, moans, rattles, and hissing sounds. But in the evenings he shifts into low gear and works with softer materials, blissfully tending to one-thousand, ethereal, multi-hued orchids.

On a regular day at work, he inspects, test drives, and repairs six or seven Volvos alongside his mentor and co-worker Eric Bjorklund. And whether he's deducing why a bulb socket melted, why the fuel injection system plunged into such a crazed state that a car lost power, or why a car continually burps coolant, he approaches the task with the calm of a Zen master.

He has every reason to remain composed. His two-year degree in automotive technology, four-year apprenticeship in Marin under the tutelage of long-time Ackerman co-worker Eric Bjorklund, plus his sixteen-year tenure at Ackerman's, guarantee he can fix almost everything by himself.

A recent, 11-month quest into the world of garage ownership at the Orange Garage, next door to Ackerman's, ended with his return to the shop with fresh perspective. "I learned I'm a better mechanic than a front office guy. I found out that I love to move around and use my hands."

Co-worker Eric Bjorklund appreciates the renewed opportunity to team up with his buddy to solve a mechanical conundrum. This was the case when customer Richard Garcia brought his Volvo S80 to the shop for the first time in January complaining of an overheated engine.

When Eric hooked the car up to the computerized diagnostic system, a prerequisite for newer cars, a trouble code suggesting a faulty thermostat appeared.

So, with customer safety in mind, he replaced the old thermostat because its job was done in a car with 135,000 miles on the odometer.

But something was still amiss and only 50% fixed. "The computerized diagnostics system can throw left curves that set you off in strange directions," said Adam who got in on the act. Three hours into the job, the mechanics slew the dragon when a process of elimination drew their attention to the water pump that looked and sounded fine on the outside but showed signs of a water circulation problem.

"For the life of us we could not figure out what was going on. Eventually we pulled off the water pump cover and found, to our surprise, that the fan blades were broken off," said Eric. "Then it hit us, whoever worked on the car last had installed a cheap, plastic impeller not made by Volvo. The plastic blades had snapped with the water pressure. No diagnostics system can pick up on that kind of problem," said Adam.

In his free time, the 45-year-old Marin native enjoys dirt-bike racing on designated Ukiah mountain trails, but it's his new passion for orchid growing that's changed his life, and enriched his evenings.

In fact he credits his new-found love of orchids for bringing calm to life that spills over into car repair. "The orchid teaches me patience. I'm a type-A personality, and learning to care for orchids has taught me how to deal with frustration at work. Caring for them is a totally Zen activity."

Anderson arrived at this exotic world unexpectedly. Ironically, he was not on a quest for love, beauty, knowledge or adventure when he found all of it wrapped around a piece of bark at the San Francisco orchid show in the spring of 2007.

The plant he braked for was a flowering white Epidendrum Parkinsonianum, native to Mexico, Central America, and Panama, which grows without soil. "It was fabulous, absolutely fabulous, with twelve to fourteen-inch green succulent leaves hanging down, and long white flowers that looked like octopi."

Without knowing how to care for the plant or how it would change his life, he bought it for \$30, and carried it to his Marin home. "I almost killed it because I didn't water it. It turned yellow, leaves started to fall off in the kitchen window. I went on the Internet for information, found it, and saved the orchid. It took two years before it rebloomed. I was very upset at the time, but it's still my favorite orchid."

Spellbound by the flow, shapes, and growth patterns of the flower, he collected 100 orchids in one year. The windows in his house became so crowded that he could no longer see out of them. "Some fared well and some met their demise. Surprisingly, the cat didn't mess with them once."

The need for expansion and the desire to have a place where he could mount the plants on hard cork, branches, and seashells, led to his building a fully-automated, 400- square-foot, green house that now houses 1,000 plants and pulses with jungle music and rain forest tracks. "Plants like loud white noise. It does not necessarily have to be music. They just like noise."

This floral paradise, complete with a full-bellied Buddha, is where you'll find Anderson at daybreak. With a cup of hot Earl Grey tea in

Continued on page 3

Featured Customer: Lisette Ruane

Lisette Ruane's attachment to her kids, her childhood Alaskan home, her Volvos, and Ackerman's, is as strong as the specimens in her rock collection.

"I don't know why, but I just love rocks," says Lisette as she gestures to the smaller stones stored in glass jars, the larger ones placed in ceramic bowls, and the largest ones displayed on her built-in living room shelves.

Reaching for one of her favorites, a purplish hunk of limestone with a white marble crown, she holds it aloft and explains how a family member brought it back from the island of Inishmór situated in Galway Bay, off Ireland's West Coast.

Just as sea, wind, and rain shaped that stone, Lisette's early childhood experiences shaped her life. Born in her grandmother's Marin house in 1967, frequent relocation marked her first years until her artist mom, in search of a simpler life, settled in Homer Alaska when Lisette was three.

She and her two sisters spent six years there, long enough to establish the roots that now take Lisette's own family back for summer visits. "My two children are very attached to Homer. "It's a magical place with lots of spirit."

Memories of that Alaskan childhood are as vibrant as the twenty-seven fruit-bearing trees in her terraced Montclair garden. "In my heart I grew up in Alaska. I moved around so much as a child that the six-year period there was the longest we'd stayed anywhere."

Set in the Alaskan backwoods, her round, wooden, home had a wood-burning stove, but no running hot water or indoor plumbing. "There was a tree trunk going up the middle of the two-story house and the support beams went into the trunk. When you looked up, you saw that the beams formed a snowflake pattern," recalls Lisette.

Today she wishes her kids had the chance to tackle some of her childhood chores. "By age seven or eight I could haul water from the stream, chop firewood and take care of the chickens we raised for food. We also had rabbits and a big garden. I remember a potato field nestled into the woods, and I can still remember the feel of the cold dirt on our freezing bare hands as we dug up potatoes with shovels."

Unencumbered by TV, and surrounded by teachers who championed the philosophy of A.S. Neill's Democratic School Movement, the outdoors became Lisette's schoolhouse. "The adults created an environment where there was freedom and education without it seeming like education. Instead of following a standard curriculum, we learned to play chess, and when we found dead birds in the wild we learned how to skin them and how to preserve the skulls in formaldehyde."

Eventually Lisette moved back to the Bay Area and attended Berkeley High School in the 1970s. When she passed her GED, she left school, worked in book stores, and later spent twelve years as a pre-school teacher.

Somewhere in the midst of a 1980s Bay Area mod-and-rocker revival movement she began to think about settling down and having a family. "I was a mod back then. I wore mini skirts, and mini dresses with a Mondrian print. The guys wore narrow-cut suits with lapels, tab-collared shirts, thin ties and Chelsea boots. The fashion was so erratic that a buttoned, Edwardian-inspired jacket you wore in the morning might be out of fashion by the afternoon," says Lisette.

Fifteen years later, dressed casually in blue jeans and a rust-colored V-neck sweater, the mod turned Volvo-driving mom is in tune with life's simple pleasures. "Just being alive, being a part of it all, looking out at those cloudy March skies that remind me of Ireland make me feel happy," says Lisette.

Best of all for her, is being able to take care of her own kids as a stay-at-home mom. "I can't imagine having someone else raise my children. I love being the person to watch their achievements and to see them grow."

But Lisette also finds an outlet for her creativity by planning a children's book about a troll princess, assembling earrings and necklaces, and crafting mosaics at a nearby studio. On the living room floor, a knitting basket packed with skeins of wool speared with knitting needles reveal yet another passion.

"Normally, I have about 13 projects going at once: baby clothes, scarves, sweaters, and tea cozies. I love knitting because it's portable. I knit at meetings, I knit in the dark, and I've even knitted socks while waiting to pick up my Volvo at Ackerman's."

Lisette purchased the first of her two Volvos when her first child was five months old. "She's the reason I switched from a two-door hatch back to a four-door Volvo." Nowadays, both Volvos fit into her life as neatly as they do in the driveway outside her home. They earn their keep as Lisette uses them to transport her son and daughter to and from school, to lug groceries, to get to her mosaic class, and to take family road trips as close as Tahoe and as far away as Vancouver.

"When I was growing up Volvos were for rich people. But today, most people can manage to drive them. I like that, but most of all I like the way Volvos handle. They have good pick up, the turn radius is fantastic, and you can fit anything in them. I know, because I've fit two twin mattresses and two bunk beds from Costco into my Volvo-blue station wagon," said Lisette.

Serendipity led her to Ackerman's in 2006. When a previous repair shop proved unsatisfactory, she found an Ackerman advertisement in the yellow pages, read some positive online customer reviews, and brought her cars in for service.

Three years later, Ackerman's has earned her loyalty. "I feel they do a good job. They handle all my repairs well. I am always satisfied with my cars after I get them back and they are usually cleaner than when I left them! Also, they take good care of me. Once while on the way home from picking the kids up from school my oil light came on. I pulled off the freeway and drove right to Ackerman's for help. Even though I didn't have an appointment, they checked my oil, filled it up, and had me safely on my way in about 15 minutes."

In addition to appreciating on-the-spot help, Lisette likes Bruce's set-in-cement policy of helping customer prioritize repairs and guaranteeing workmanship. "Bruce is good about calling me and letting me know what work is necessary and what can wait. That's what I was looking for when I first brought my car in. Also, they stand behind the work they do. Once I had some minor issue with a Volvo repair that was difficult to resolve. I brought my car back after a service and Bruce worked on it until it was fixed. So many times, at other mechanics, I have been told that I would still be charged extra if I brought my car back for the same or similar issue because it was supposedly fixed when I left and it wasn't their fault if it flared up again. I have never had that experience at Ackerman's."

Chance may have brought Lisette Ruane to Ackerman's but confidence in Bruce and the ASE-certified technicians' Volvo know-how keeps her there. Just as she treasures the individual beauty of the rocks in her collection, she treasures Ackerman's rock-solid customer service and technical expertise. "I will probably keep driving Volvos forever so I can keep Ackerman's as my mechanic. I have finally found a mechanic that I trust and I am a picky customer," concludes Lisette.



Lisette Ruane finds Ackerman's service as solid as the specimens in her rock collection.

Bruce Wins Two Trophies In 2009 National Division Races

Lady Luck was no where in sight when Bruce pulled off two second-place finishes at the March 15th Sports Car Club of America event in Willows, California.

As usual, Bruce deflected all, (okay most), of the praise and credited his Volvo sports car mechanics with this first success of the year. "To win you first must be able to finish, meaning I have to have a safe and incredibly reliable car. Given my unique perspective as your mechanic, I strive to give each and every one of my customers the same quality service I've come to expect," says Bruce. Future meets include the regional opener at Sears Point on March 29. The trophy count is on. Stay tuned.

Continued from page 1

hand, he tends to the plants for an hour before going to work and talks to them regularly. "Grow, grow is what I usually say."

Before retiring for the evening he spends another hour there soaking up the pleasure of the colorful beauties. "The key to their survival is matching their climate, whether it's tropical, subtropical, or monsoon. But you have to remember that in China and Nepal, some orchids require a freeze to bloom, and some orchids require a complete dry rest with not a drop of water. For some of my orchids that means no water from Halloween to Saint Valentine's Day."

Since he bought that first orchid he's had a chance to reflect on what he finds so alluring about the species. "The plant itself is special because it doesn't need dirt to grow. Also, contrary to popular belief, not all orchids are tropical or jungle plants. The fact is, orchids grow on every continent except Antarctica," said Adam. He adds that their diversity, with 30,000 species remaining, and their pollination by one specific insect or animal also hold him in thrall.

One of his three favorites is the bi-colored *Dendrobium Cuthburtoni* from the mountainous regions of Ecuador. "It's difficult to grow in Marin. But I like a challenge. Without a challenge, I lose interest," said Adam who also loves the growth patterns of the white and blood-red stripes of the *Bulbophyllum Affine* that flourishes in Borneo and other South Pacific islands. "It's a wandering plant mounted on a piece of wood. It sends out new roots and growth which blankets the side of a tree. Each new root becomes a pretty little bloom. You get dozens of pretty little flowers sitting there."

But the one that takes his breath away for beauty and magic tricks is the Ghost Orchid or *Polyrhiza Lindenii* which takes its energy in

through its roots as opposed to its leaves. "When it blooms, the snow-white, frilled flower on a 12-inch-long stem looks like it's floating because the stem becomes invisible."

Sometimes the lines between Volvo repair and orchid tending blur. It's now clear to Adam that the affection he feels for the animate orchids and an inanimate Volvo produce a common sentiment. "The feelings I experience when getting a difficult orchid to bloom and successfully resolving a tricky Volvo situation are similar," he concluded.



(photo by Adam Anderson.)

Adam Anderson built a 400-square-foot green house to accommodate his orchid collection.

Master Technician Adam Anderson's Tips For High Volvo-driving Pleasure

- Service the car regularly.
- Make sure wipers work well.
- Check tire pressures monthly.
- Pay attention to your seat belt condition.
- Watch for any warning lights or messages.
- Report any unusual noises, smells, or odd vibrations.
- Enjoy your Volvo knowing that when it comes to dragons under the hood, Ackerman's is always armed and ready!

Name Your Favorite School or Charity Bruce Writes Them a Check for 5% of your Bill

When a paying customer asks Bruce for a donation to his or her favorite school or charity, Bruce willingly writes a check equaling 5% of that customer's bill. Then he gives the check to the customer for delivery, or mails it to the beneficiary. Between January 1, 2009 and March 20, 2009, 28 customer requests resulted in \$1,608.20 for schools and \$563 for a variety of other worthy causes.



A Certified Green Business

**2220 San Pablo Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94702**

510.549.9330

www.AckermanServicingVolvo.com



Bruce Ackerman, owner

Liz O'Connell-Gates, writing and photography

Email: lizocg@sbcglobal.net

Special thanks to Pat Russell.

BERKELEY

Dial 510-549-9330 Monthly

To Enter Monthly Chez-Panisse-Dinner Raffle

Add our license plates and your name is in the hat:

2009 winners: Lucie Smith (January) • Bob Schneider (February)

Drawing is on 1st of every month.

ACKERMAN'S

Visit us online at: www.AckermanServicingVolvo.com