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## Student gets under the hood for auto work

by Elahe Izadi | Staff Writer

Brittany Darling puts her gold purse down on her desk and heads to her locker. The 5-foot-1-inch student pulls large, oil-stained overalls over her skinny, dark jeans. Moments later, she jacks up her 1995 Oldsmobile, unscrews the hubcaps, pulls off the back tires and examines the drums. Her brakes have been giving her trouble lately, but a simple resurfacing of one of the drums will stop the squeaking.

This is Darling's second year in Laurel High School's vocational technology program, where the senior is learning auto mechanic skills that have come in handy for similar moments.

Darling, 17, is the youngest of three girls in the program and one of two females who work in the Old Glory Harley Davidson auto shop in Laurel.

Darling didn't grow up working on vehicles, but she does remember the first time she was fascinated by a car. As her mother examined the engine of her old, problem-prone Chevette, a 10-year-old Darling intently studied all of the parts under the hood.

"I like taking stuff apart and putting it back together," Darling said.

So when she found out about her school's automotive program, she jumped at the chance to enroll. Her new skills are now even saving her family money as she does all the family cars' tune-ups and maintenance work for free.

Glen Sorber, Laurel High's automotive tech instructor, said Darling quickly picked up the mechanical skills. "It was nothing for her," he said. "If I could get a few more students like her, I'd be in good shape."

Darling received her Automotive Service Excellence certification in December. The ASE is a requirement for many automotive shop mechanics.

She also has been doing her work-study at a Harley Davidson automotive shop in Laurel for eight months, making her the youngest intern there. The shop's other female is a full-time technician.

Darling said she hasn't been discriminated against while working in the male-dominated field, but her short stature has proven to be a big obstacle. She has to climb on top of larger cars to work on them, and she can push only the smallest Harley Davidson motorcycles, at 800 pounds.

Laurel High School's vocational technology program focuses mostly on cars, Darling said, so it took her a little while to become accustomed to working on motorcycles.

Lead technician Fred Jones said at first some customers were apprehensive to have her work on their bikes, but were pleased with the final results.

"She's a good worker. She's not somebody you have to keep your eye on," said service manager Carlos Riley. "I feel comfortable with her working on anything that comes into the shop."

However, Riley and the other technicians, while acknowledging Darling's skill, are pushing her to go to college instead of straight into the automotive world because a college degree will provide her with a more secure future.



Raphael Talisman/The Gazette

**Laurel High School senior Brittany Darling, 17, of Laurel performs a compression test on a Chevy Blazer during her Automotive Technology class at Laurel High School on Tuesday. Darling is one of two female students in the class**

And with a grade point average of 3.97 and numerous Advanced Placement courses on her transcript, Darling plans to attend either Johns Hopkins University or the University of Maryland, College Park. She plans to major in mechanical engineering, but hopes to still find time to work on cars.

“I got to do something with my hands, or I can’t really be happy,” she said.

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