

Endearment Without Terms

By Bob Schmeichel

In 1979, while still in high school at the young age of 17, Ben Ekrem bought a 1946 Ford pickup as a project to play around with from a junk yard neighbor. The idea of building an old hot rod pickup was strong that summer for a couple of months as he tore it down to the frame. And then for some strange coincidence Ben discovered girls and other fun things to do with his time, which changed his priorities for more than 30 years. Because of his involvement with taking the old Ford pickup apart, Ben started tinkering on other people's projects playing around doing bodywork, which eventually led him to college to learn further about the trade as a career. As time moved forward while working through college and dating Tami for about a year, Ben was diagnosed with diabetes.

Tami knew all of the ins and outs of diabetes because of the history of it within her own family and didn't let it scare her away when Ben asked her to marry him. So from that point on with having and raising kids, along with creating a good life for all, the '46 Ford pickup was pushed further back in Ben's thoughts. Ben's bodyshop career directions and relocating the family over the years to different parts of the state to better themselves kind of became the norm with life being good and fast forward until late of 2011. Because of the diabetes, Ben was starting to have some health-related issues that were wearing him out and soon to be diagnosed with kidney failure and a weakening pancreas. To survive Ben was immediately put on a weekly kidney dialysis regiment while Tami began a search for help beginning with the National Kidney Foundation to apply for a kidney donor. Tami knew of all the connections to reach out to because of her father having a successful kidney transplant in 1970. While Tami was willing, as well as one of their daughters, to give up a kidney for Ben, their blood types didn't match Ben's, so the frustration and search was on. During the dialysis treatments Ben was on disability, away from work, struggling to keep a positive mind set with what he was going through while hoping for a good outcome. Eventually this became a more stressful time and Ben decided to bring the old '46 Ford pickup home from where it had sat for 30-plus years and use it as a distraction or therapy for himself in between dialysis treatments. After getting it home, the idea worked as he thought it would allowing him to get focused away from the realities of his life then and finally get going on building this long-awaited idea of a hot rod truck. After months of dialysis treatments and working on the truck when he felt like it, a long-time friend's wife came forward from Wisconsin to volunteer one of her kidneys saying she felt she had to do it. After extensive testing, it was found out that she was a match with Ben's blood type and the transplant would happen soon. The transplant happened in August of 2012, and then a year later in November of 2013 Ben also received a pancreas transplant. These two events changed Ben's life immensely leaving him without diabetes in his life anymore. He said he is doing fine today kidney wise and finding some wonderful normalcy in his life again without ever forgetting about the gifts that basically keep on giving. These days when Ben is not working on his new career as an insurance auditor, he is focused on his '46 Ford pickup with Tami's help. They are pretty much physically building this truck together as they have done everything else in life!! So far they have installed a new floor in the cab, new cab corners, a new box, and are still working on getting it exactly the way they want it. To make it roll low, they installed a Fatman (Mustang II) front end with coilovers and disc brakes while a 9-inch Ford rear end with coilovers is held in place with a 4-link set-up that completes the rear half. To make great sounds up front and push the picture, a race car nephew put together a hopped-up (as Ben says it) 350 Chevy, which is controlled by a 700R-4 AOD trans. I vividly remember standing there and seeing the first time they drove this truck into Hardees early last summer in 2015 on a Saturday evening without a windshield – that's wanting it pretty bad!

But I have to say, I was as excited for them as they were with smiles on their faces as they rolled into the parking lot. After they parked and got out, the truck was surrounded with people looking at the first-time showing of this hot rod pickup and many checking out the engineering put into the rear suspension, mainly because there wasn't a floor in the box yet. I thought the exhaust sounded pretty cool like a healthy race car, but quiet. After that day, they had a new windshield and rear window installed to keep the wind out of their smiles. The doors still have the original glass. Ben and Tami continued to work on the truck while driving it a lot last summer where ever they took it and not always without small issues. Those little things are getting ironed out as time goes on and the truck is getting closer to where they want it to be with its outward appearance shouting all hotrod. Ben hopes to hook up the air conditioning soon and install 4.11 rear end gears to liven the truck up, for a second chance at life in the fast lane as has been given to him.

