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## Couple enjoys a classic love affair

**By Jennifer K Mahal**  
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When Shari and Sam Muraos park their twin 1963 Ford Falcon Futuras at the eighth annual Cajon Classic Cruise in June, it will be more than the debut showing of two beautiful classic cars. It will be an expression of love fully realized.

“That car means the earth to me. It's been the dream car of mine since high school,” Shari Muraos, 49, said of her hardback coupe, which is being restored.

The Falcon – one of 28,496 of that model made in 1963, according to theclassicford.com – entered her life on Valentine's Day 2006 in an Albertson's parking lot. The Muraos had joined other members of the East County Cruisers, a local group of car, truck and motorcycle enthusiasts, in Santee to travel to a picnic when Shari saw a Falcon with its hood up.

She remembers thinking it was beautiful. Then the aqua-blue hood came down. On the windshield was the message, “To Shari, I love you more.”

“And that's when she started bawling,” said Sam, 53. “I've never seen such great tears of joy. If you're gonna make your wife cry, this is a good way.”

The Santee couple, who will be married four years in July, met as neighbors in Pemberton, N.J. They went on one date, a dinner in Atlantic City, when he was 24 and she was 21.

“I wore a three-piece suit and she wore a beautiful dress. It was pouring rain,” Sam remembered.

Sam, a mechanic at the time, picked up Shari in his baby-blue 1967 Volkswagen Beetle and got soaked walking from the parking lot. Shari still has the picture of them, his arm draped around her, smiling.

Years passed. There were marriages to other people, children and divorces on both sides. Then in 1999, Shari saw Sam's picture on her sister's refrigerator door as part of a holiday card he had sent.

“She said, 'He always asks about you,' ” Shari said.

She asked for Sam's number, got up the nerve to call him and the relationship was renewed. At their wedding reception, Sam had the Atlantic City picture reproduced on the cake.

Before getting together, neither knew that the other had a love of classic cars. Besides the Falcons – Sam said his green Falcon was bought as a parts car, but was “too nice to butcher” – the Muraos have a 1931 Ford roadster, a 1966 Ford Mustang Fastback and two work cars.

Sam became a mechanic after high school, working on Volkswagens and Porsches. His father nixed the 1971 Barracuda he wanted to buy as his first car. Instead, Sam, now a quality-control manager for Commercial Asphalt, got a 1966 Ford Fairlane, which he no longer has.

Shari, whose first car was a 1966 Ford Galaxie, wanted to take auto mechanic classes in high school, but the school wouldn't allow it.

"I was a cheerleader and a majorette," she said. "They said 'How are you going to be a majorette with grease under your fingernails?'"

Her Falcon is the first classic car she's owned, and she hopes to learn to do some of the maintenance. The car, which runs well, has not had an easy path to restoration.

In March 2007, the night before the Muraos were to show their Falcons together for the first time, both vehicles were damaged in the driveway of their home. A vandal ripped off a side mirror from Sam's Falcon and used it to beat the hood of Shari's car, the Muraos said.

The first body shop Shari found to restore her car took \$4,000 of the funds she had saved over a year, removed the fenders and doors and promptly went out of business without returning the money. Other garages quoted her unaffordable amounts for the restoration.

Determined to fix the car properly, the Muraos were going to attempt to do the work themselves. That's when Carlos Vera of Prestige Collision Center in Ramona intervened. After hearing their story from Steve Lordigyan, a member of East County Cruisers, Vera offered to restore Shari's car at cost.

Vera said her story touched him. "I said, 'I have the means to help you, so I'm going to help you.'"

Vera said he is removing the old paint from the Falcon, fixing the rust and repainting the car.

When finished, Shari's ride will have a coat of pearlized aqua-green paint and upholstery in aqua with white vinyl inserts. Lately, she has been polishing all of the chrome, which will be taken to Vera's shop for installation.

Shari, an accounts receivable clerk for Lloyd's Pest Control, visits the Falcon every Saturday.

Lordigyan, events coordinator for the Cajon Classic Cruise, said Shari's love for her car has been the driving force behind the restoration.

"It's been a long, emotional, sometimes tedious procedure and a lot of heart and time and effort and money are going into this build," said Lordigyan. Later, he said, "I think anybody else would probably dropped that project awhile ago."

Shari hopes to have the car back next week, in plenty of time for the Cajon Classic Cruise.

Car-show season generally starts in April and goes through September. This year the Cruise is starting on June 4 because of construction on El Cajon's main road. The show, which runs through Sept. 24, was shortened from 22 weeks to 19 weeks.

Every Wednesday during the Cruise, cars dated before 1979 will line Main Street between Van Houten Avenue and Claydelle Avenue starting at 5 p.m. Specialty cars, car clubs and motorcycles will be parked on side streets.

There are several theme nights, including Hall of Flames (June 25), Monster Truck Mania (July 9), Bike Night (Aug. 20) and Thunder on Main (Sept. 17), featuring nitro methanol-burning "cackle cars," named for the noises they make.

"We hand out earplugs," Lordigyan said.

Weekly trophies will be given to cars picked by a team of volunteer judges. Sam, through his company S & S Trophies, is making the awards this year.

The Muraos, who volunteered for the Cruise last year, said they like the camaraderie of the weekly car show.

"There are a lot of people we don't get to see in winter," Shari said. "Everybody comes out."

But while she's looking forward to the Cajon Classic Cruise debut, Shari said her Falcon is more than just a showpiece.

“You want to enjoy your car. It's not just a possession,” she said. “I am going to the grocery store in that car. It's not just something to dust off now and then.”

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■ Jennifer K Mahal is a freelance writer in San Diego.

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