

# 1970 MERCURY COUGAR ELIMINATOR

A RARE CAT RISES FROM THE ASHES OF A NEAR-FATAL ENGINE FIRE

BY MIKE McNESSOR • PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY CRYSTAL LAWRENCE AND KTL RESTORATIONS



**E**VERY YEAR, ON JUNE 10, A REMINDER pops up on Chuck Donaldson's Outlook calendar: "Check your fire extinguishers."

It was on that day, in 2014, that Chuck aimed a fire extinguisher at the flames engulfing the engine compartment of his 1970 Cougar Eliminator and squeezed the trigger. But instead of saving the day, Chuck's extinguisher wheezed and puked out about a cup of dry chemical. Meanwhile, the blaze, ignited by a backfire from the Cougar's numbers-matching 428 Cobra Jet, was getting angrier by the second.

"I had been cranking the engine, which was unusual because it typically started pretty easily," Chuck said. "The battery was starting to run down a little bit, but I pumped the gas pedal a couple more times and cranked it again. Suddenly it went: Boom! And then flames shot out of everywhere. I tried using my fire extinguisher, but it was expired, so I slammed the hood back down hoping to cut off some of the oxygen and ran to get the garden hose."

When Chuck returned, moments later, the fire had grown even more intense, melting a carburetor fuel bowl, burning the exterior paint, and consuming the wiring, rubber parts, etc. Worse still, the Cougar was parked in Chuck's garage—attached to his house.

Chuck's neighbor saw the smoke and called the fire department. When firefighters arrived, they launched an all-out assault on the burning Cougar. They pried open its hood with crow-bars and flooded the engine with water. Plastic dash bits were smoldering inside the car, so they smashed the windows to ventilate the interior. Once it was safe, they pushed the Cougar outside and continued pouring water on the car for almost a half hour.

"By the time they left it wasn't even smoldering," Chuck said. "The fire was out." As the emergency rigs drove off, Chuck could see his neighbors in the Dallas, Texas, suburb, all gathered around the cul-de-sac in front of his house. His young daughter, fearing the worst, had moved her pet bunny rabbit to an undisclosed location. Chuck was dumbstruck by what had transpired.



**1.** After the smoke cleared, Chuck Donaldson loaded up his 428 CJ-powered 1970 Cougar Eliminator and trailered it from his home near Dallas, Texas, to KTL Restorations in Danville, Virginia. **2.** Another trailer ride took the body from KTL to a chemical stripping facility where the paint was removed. **3.** The stripping revealed a need for some additional work on the car, including the installation of these hand-formed repair panels on the lower quarters. **4.** Half of a trunk pan from a donor car was installed out back. **5.** After trying to weld up pinholes in the roof, KTL's Kurt Lawrance removed the entire skin and replaced it with another from a parts car. **6.** The doors required some metal repair and were test fit for alignment, then removed again for paint. **7.** The original 428 required custom machined pistons because the block deck and head mating surfaces needed extensive milling. **8.** The owner had replaced the original radiator and set it aside, so KTL was able to re-core the factory piece and install it back in the car. **9.** A before and after shot of a spring that was reconditioned and refinished with replicated factory marks. **10.** A factory-style disc brake setup was used in place of original front drums for the sake of driveability. Original suspension parts were restored and replaced.



"I was in shock, it was almost surreal," he said. "I know cars aren't people, but they kind of become part of the family. When something like this happens, you go through the stages of grief where you're angry and you can't believe it: How could I have been so stupid? Then you start to think, now what am I going to do?"

This now nightmarish-looking Cougar Eliminator had been Chuck's boyhood dream car. He'd bought it on May 6, 2000, from a noted Cougar Eliminator expert who knew its history and even pointed out some of the details that were incorrect.

"I bought it to use as a driver from Frank Bowers with the Cougar Eliminator Registry," Chuck said. "It wasn't a perfect car at the time. The power steering brackets were wrong, but

everything was there. It was a numbers-matching car with a 428 and four-speed, plus the interior was really cool."

Best of all, it reminded Chuck of one of the new Eliminators he'd seen parked on the local dealer's lot back when he was 10 years old.

"My friend and I were walking past a Lincoln-Mercury dealer in 1970 where they had several Eliminators lined up, all painted wild colors," Chuck said. "We ran up to look at the window stickers—three of the six were Boss 302s, and there were two 428 cars. We must've looked at them for almost an hour and I remember thinking, someday I'm going to get one of these."

Perhaps there was still enough of that boyish enthusiasm

left in Chuck more than 40 years later encouraging him to seek out someone who could make his fire-ravaged car shine like new again—like one of those brightly colored Eliminators he'd spent years wanting.

"In September, I started checking around to find a good restorer," Chuck said. "I contacted some guys from the Lone Star Cougar Club in Dallas. That's when KTL's name came up. A car they'd restored crossed the auction block at Barrett-Jackson (in 2013 for \$140,000) and that created a big buzz in the Cougar community. It was like, 'Wow, a Cougar finally sold for over 100,000!'"

KTL Restorations, in Danville, Virginia, is owned by husband-and-wife team Kurt and Crystal Lawrance and

specializes in concours-quality Cougar restorations. Kurt is a lifelong Cougar enthusiast who quit his job as an electrician more than 15 years ago to restore these underserved cars full time. Dozens of restorations later, the Lawrances have built KTL into one of the country's premier shops for Cougars.

So, Chuck sent the Lawrances some photos of his Cougar and was pleasantly surprised by Kurt's response.

"When I looked at the photos I thought, it doesn't look too bad," Kurt said.

Crystal, however, qualified that a little: "No, it looked bad," she said. "But Kurt's 'too bad' and somebody else's 'too bad' are two different things. We take on the worst of the worst that's out there."



In September 2014, Chuck loaded his charred Eliminator on a trailer and towed it up to KTL to let Kurt and Crystal assess the car in person. Kurt remained undaunted.

"I noticed that a lot of damage was done trying to get the fire out," Kurt said. "The hood had been ripped off, the fenders were damaged, the grille was broken, and every window was busted."

There was obvious fire damage too, like the deformed dash pad and burned wiring harnesses. But some of the heat's insidious work didn't reveal itself until months later.

"While the car was sitting at the shop, the firewall just fell out because the heat had fatigued the metal," Kurt said. "That was probably the spot where it burned the hottest."

Since this Cougar's body seemed fragile, Kurt and Crystal decided to skip media blasting it in house and instead sent it to a chemical stripper. This revealed some more work that would have to be tackled.

"Once we got it back, we found that the quarters needed quite a bit of bodywork, so we ended up hand fabricating lower quarter panel patches for the car," Kurt said. "We also had to replace half of the trunk floor using a floor from another car, and install a full floor, a cowl, and a firewall."

But that wasn't all. One late night in the shop, that stretched into the early morning hours, Kurt came to the conclusion that there was no saving the car's roof skin either.

"After the chemical dip, these tiny holes appeared everywhere," he said. "I tried to patch it, but one morning at 3:30 a.m. I cut off the roof skin and replaced it with one from another car."

A hood and a left front fender were also donated by a parts car, as was a trunk lid, though the original doors and right front fender were repaired and replaced.

The Cougar's bare sheetmetal was cleaned with BASF Glasurit 360-4 Metal Cleaner and mild abrasive pads before being shot with epoxy primer. After addressing any areas that needed smoothing with filler, the body was sprayed with BASF R-M RMP 2K high-build primer. After several applications of primer and numerous block-sanding sessions to get the body arrow straight, sealer was applied, followed by three coats of Glasurit urethane base and six coats of clear. For a show-stopping shine, the body was stick sanded with 1200-, 2000-, 3000-, and 5000-grit paper, followed by buffing with 3M compound.

Long before the Cougar's stunning body had taken shape,

Kurt removed the Cougar's 428 Cobra Jet, tore it down, and found surprises there as well.

"When I pulled the engine apart, I could see it had been rebuilt before," Kurt said. "The block was bored .030 and it looked like the heads had been milled on a belt sander."

The heads would have to be resurfaced and the block decked, but removing more material would also mean a higher, less-pump-gas-friendly compression ratio, so a set of custom forged pistons were milled to keep the squish in the neighborhood of 10:1.

The crankshaft was cut, the rods reconditioned, and the block bored. The heads also were treated to bronze guides, hardened seats, and stainless valves. The machine work on the 428 was handled by Motion Machine in Danville, while KTL handled the engine assembly and refinishing in-house. The four-speed transmission, too, was rebuilt at KTL, and

the stock-style clutch was upgraded to a more leg-friendly Centerforce unit.

The chassis was stripped; hard parts were media blasted, rebuilt, and refinished. In the process, a factory disc-brake setup was tracked down and retrofitted to the Cougar in place of the stock front drums. Kurt also assembled a factory-correct power steering system for the car. All of the wiring, brake, and fuel lines were also replaced.

Chuck's Cougar required all new glass, so another Cougar donated a set of windows in excellent condition. Meanwhile, inside, new houndstooth-style upholstery was custom stitched and installed on the original reconditioned seat frames. The headliner and carpet were replaced with new, while the dash pad, dash faces, and instrument panel were removed from another Eliminator, restored, and installed in Chuck's car. Kurt was able to repair some fire damage at the



**ABOVE:** The seats were reskinned with custom covers replicating the factory deluxe houndstooth upholstery. The steering wheel, console, and door panels are restored originals, but the fire-damaged dash was entirely replaced.

**OPPOSITE:** The 428's den is now better than new and sports show-winning details like an original-style battery and a smog system. A set of custom wheels were installed for the SEMA show but will be replaced with OEM steel wheels.

## OWNER'S VIEW



**G**iven the amount of fire-related damage to Chuck Donaldson's 1970 Cougar Eliminator, we had to know where it ranked among KTL's numerous other projects.

"It was challenging just to locate the parts to put this one back together," Kurt said. "Typically, metal-work on the floor, cowl, and firewall is pretty normal for these cars—I expect stuff like that to be rusted. The sad part with this was that there was so much that needed to be replaced because of the fire."

Crystal said she enjoys seeing a car like this, that many would've seen as a complete loss, roll out of KTL's shop looking better than new again.

"We see a lot of bad cars, and either we're going to save them or they're going to the scrap yard," she said. "Why wouldn't you save one of these cars if you could?"—Kurt and Crystal Lawrence, KTL Restorations Inc.

forward end of the center console and return it to the Cougar's cockpit along with the original, rebuilt Hurst shifter. The original interior door panels received a cosmetic makeover as well and were subsequently returned to duty.

Some 2,000 hours later, the Cougar was finished and ready for its debut at the 2018 SEMA Show in Las Vegas, Nevada, where showgoers gave it a warm welcome.

"It was very well received at SEMA," Crystal said. "The fact that it was a Cougar Eliminator made people stop and take notice. It's not your typical SEMA build."

Chuck saw the car again for the first time at SEMA and said he was a little overwhelmed by the experience.

"I met the Lawrances in Vegas and they did the unveiling for me," Chuck said. "It was surprisingly emotional. When I sat in the driver's seat it felt immediately familiar; it was the car I used to drive."

Four long years, thousands of dollars, and one monumental rebuild later, Chuck said he's now more vigilant about fire extinguisher maintenance around his house and in some way grateful for this experience.

"In retrospect, had the fire not happened, I would've never met Kurt, the car never would've been restored to the quality that it is now, all the people that I met I wouldn't have met, and I wouldn't have had the experience at SEMA," he said. "I'll have the opportunity to meet a lot more people and make a lot of new friends in the future."

After the Cougar makes the rounds at shows, Chuck said he looks forward to getting the car back to his garage and spending some time behind the wheel.

"I have to drive it. It is a car after all, but I will be careful with it," he said. "I guess you can enjoy it by looking at it, but for me the best way is to take it for a spin." ■

