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## Women should study Car Repair 101

*MELISSA PREDDY**Special to The Detroit News*

While cruising through the countryside, the unmistakable scent of scorched rubber wafted through open windows and permeated the passenger cabin of my car.

"Someone burning tires -- what a shame," I thought absently, enjoying the scenic twists and turns of the rural roadway. I scanned the fields in vain for flaming Firestones, melting Michelins and a pyre of Pirellis. Finally, reality prevailed: There was only one tire burning, and it apparently was attached to the front axle of my vehicle.

Nothing like a car repair saga to start a carefree weekend off right. As it turned out, the problem was little more than a frozen brake caliper slide (whatever that is), which promptly was unfrozen for a nominal sum. But I didn't know that outcome for about a day and spent frustrating hours on the phone trying to locate a good mechanic on unfamiliar turf and getting long-distance diagnostic guesses from the men in my life.

Automotive repairs and maintenance shouldn't be such a source of angst and negative emotions, but they are. Especially for women. Even women like me, the daughter of an engineer who once fixed a stranded Gran Torino station wagon with the only implement at hand -- a Tic Tac mint.

You'd think with that kind of genetic ingenuity running in my veins, a vehicular glitch would be no big deal. But it's beyond maddening not to know the difference between an aroma that signals a benign little fluid leak and one that's the five-minute warning before the whole engine seizes.

"And the worst part is, you feel at someone else's mercy," said Gail Dunn, a former Atlanta-area body shop manager.

### Women get a jump-start

Today, she runs the Women's Automotive Connection, which vets local repair shops and directs clients to trustworthy ones for a \$45 consulting fee.

It's no wonder her service thrives, when 89 percent of women told the Car Care Council, an aftermarket trade group, that they feel they're treated differently by mechanics because of their gender. The council formed a women's advisory board and offers tips and diagrams to help women speak mechanics' lingo at <http://www.carcare.org>>[www.carcare.org](http://www.carcare.org).

Dunn runs auto repair boot camps for women, whom she feels are ill-informed by the car sales and service industries. In the past four months, she said, she's encountered three blown engines -- ruined because their owners didn't know that cars need oil changes.

"And they were all women," Dunn sighed.

### A little knowledge can empower women

Bill Ferminos is baffled at the car know-how gender gap but freely admits it exists. The owner of Livonia Collision, Auto and Fleet Repair grew up around mechanics and shop teachers and has been a practicing

repair tech since before he was old enough to get a driver's license.

Few girls, he notes, are socialized to absorb car care through osmosis. Yet most of the customers who walk through his shop doors are female, and many polls show that women wield a preponderance of power in auto purchase and repair spending.

As Fermino's bit in bridging the gap, he teaches occasional auto repair basics classes for women at local schools and colleges. He shows them what common parts look like, outlines reasonable price ranges for common fixes like timing belts and struts, and tells them why they should remain calm when the "check engine" light comes on.

In his shop, he bans centerfold pin-ups, stocks women's magazines in the waiting room and selects staff based on how they treat female patrons.

"It's very emotional," he said. "Seventy percent of the people who come in have been ripped off -- or think they have. When they learn a little about their car and about what we do, they feel so much more empowered."

I like the idea of classes, but they're few and far between -- so some of the onus rests on us to use Google, the library and car-savvy friends before emergency strikes.

You can't blame your mechanic for the knot in your stomach if you never bothered to find out what a tie rod is or what a fan clutch does.

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