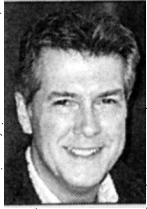


Minivan holds many memories



"Dad, I'm moving to a new apartment the Monday after graduation. Can the Windstar hold my stuff," my daughter? Anissa, soon to

turn 22 years old, said the other day.

"Well, probably, but not sure about driving it to Rock Island," I said. "Best borrow Bill's pickup."

"Oh," she said. "Is the Windstar okay?"

"Just old, honey."

Flashback to August 2001, a month before the world as Americans knew it changed forever. My wife, Yolanda, and I along with our two kids, Michael and Anissa, were speeding along in our tan Ford Windstar minivan on a two-lane highway in North Dakota. On either side were endless miles of wheat and bright yellow sunflowers. Our only company farmers harvesting wheat, air-conditioned combines cruising up and down the rolling hills. Their grain truck drivers, beds brimming with the golden harvest, tooted horns and waved. I was grateful for their presence, knowing that if we broke down help would be waiting.

"Dad," an 8-year old Anissa said, "are we ever going to return to civilization?"

"Yep," I reassured her. "Soon enough. So enjoy the view."

I'm not a car guy. I've never

dreaded trading a car or longed for a certain type. We bought the Windstar new in 1998, but since then we've spent our money on a solid, if unexciting used Buick Century and a leg-room-loving Lincoln Continental with 70,000 miles. None of these cars evoke "zoom, zoom" excitement, yet they got us from point A to point B hassle-free. We sold the Lincoln years ago and gave the Buick to Anissa.

So Yolanda and I are left with the Windstar, and that's fine by us. Over the years, we've strapped a bulging canvas carrier to the top, stacked suitcases in the back, wedged a cooler between the seats and taken off from Hoopeston to see America. Twice to the aforementioned Dakotas, the second time a few weeks before Michael went off to college. There was the summer we spent a week in Minnesota, one of the nicest family vacations ever, with a friend of mine whose father built a cabin for us to stay in. There was the trip to the Carolina's rolling the van off and on ferry's, the kids thrilled to be "in a car, on a boat!" as we skipped the interstate and island-hopped up the outer banks to Kitty Hawk, Jamestown, and into Washington D.C.

We trekked to Niagara Falls via Michigan and across Canada. Michael, new driver's permit in his pocket, lead in his right foot, causing his old man to shout:

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"It's go time. HOLD ON!" as we barreled toward the back bumper of a crawling car on a congested highway outside of Detroit.

One spring break, we traveled to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Windstar stalling on a steep grade and coasting into a driveway. I cranked her up, and we went on our way. We took several trips to South Padre Island, Texas, to see Yolanda's family, the passage through a deserted King's Ranch the desolate flip side of the fertile Dakotas. Add to this soccer games, swim meets, football games, birthday parties, piano recitals, band concerts, weddings, first communions and graduations where we filled the Windstar with family and friends, enjoying their company and the ride as much as the

events themselves.

With the kids in college, the Windstar slipped into semi-retirement, rolled out for tailgating at Illinois games or hauling stuff home from the hardware store. Back seat removed, it's like a pickup truck with a roof.

A few years ago, Yolanda and I drove to Anissa's college to bring her home for fall break. She asked us for a futon, so we bought one at Walmart, hoisted it into the back of the Windstar and headed out. On the way, however, the "Service Engine Light" glowed an ominous orange from the dashboard.

Yolanda and I exchanged uncertain looks.

"I don't want anything to happen to my van," she said. "Take it in as soon as we get home."

The local shop ran a diagnostic test and determined that to stop that shining orange light would cost \$500 plus labor.

"What happens if we don't fix it?" I asked. "The car's worth \$1,500. Will the engine be damaged? The orange light stay on?"

"You're not gonna hurt anything except gas mileage," our hometown mechanic, Chuck, said, as we stood and stared at the Windstar. "She may start rough, sometimes. But lots of cars have been driven lots of miles with warning lights on. Heck, Mike, she's just an old car."

"That she is," I said.

The next morning, a Saturday, Yolanda, Anissa and I loaded up

the Windstar and drove to Normal for ISU parents' weekend with Michael.

It was a sunny, crisp, college brochure-worthy football game day. We pulled the van into the last spot of a crowded lot, hauled out the grill, table, coolers and canvas chairs and left the hatchback open. We made fajitas with Yolanda's homemade flour tortillas and drank beer. A buddy of mine from high school dropped by. We leaned against the Windstar and caught up. It was a perfect day in every way. The home team even won. After the game we piled into the Windstar.

I glanced into the rearview mirror as we drove along the two-lane highway to Hoopeston. A now 18-year-old Anissa slept in the back, her face as untroubled as if she were 8, snug and secure in the reclined seat.

Sun setting, empty, harvested fields stretched across the horizon on either side. Winter approaching, the farmers tended to their equipment in machine sheds, already preparing for spring planting.

I patted Yolanda's knee, and we swapped weary smiles. I turned my attention to the open road and nudged the Windstar to cruising speed, doing my best to ignore the glowing orange light.

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