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THE FIRST ONE: THE HOT WHEELS MUSTANG JOE'S DAD BOUGHT HIM IN 1969, RESTORED TO FACTORY RED. PHOTO: MORNIN' MASS

CAR CLUB · PLYMOUTH, MA

One Little Mustang, One Big Club

A little Mustang from his dad started Joe Fratus on close to 4,000 Hot Wheels. A T-shirt and 20 cones started Rebels & Rods. Eight seasons in, 300 to 400 cars fill the lot on a sunny Sunday, and the Core members running it carry the same heart he started with.

BY CLASSIC PATRICK
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In 1969, at the old Benny's in the center of Plymouth, a father bought his son a little Mustang off the shelf. The son is Joe Fratus. He's closing in on 68, and he still has the car.

"I remember it like a video," he says. He rolled it across the floor, and "it seemed like it wanted to keep on going forever." In a way, it never stopped rolling. It led to a basement full of Hot Wheels, a carport full of hot rods, and a club called Rebels & Rods that fills a Plymouth lot with 300 to 400 cars every sunny Sunday. You can't tell Joe's story without the club's.

EVERYBODY'S ALIVE DOWNSTAIRS

Joe's basement holds close to 4,000 Hot Wheels, floor to ceiling, plus a "junkyard collection" too weathered to show and too dear to toss. Of all of them, the Mustang is the one he'd grab in a fire. He repainted it maybe ten times as a kid, then years later drilled out the rivets and restored it to factory red. Call it a frame-off restoration on a car the length of your thumb.

His parents, his grandparents, his brother Harry, his sister Irene and his oldest brother, Danny, who was killed at 25, are all gone now. Through every loss, Joe kept the collection and kept adding to it.

"When I go down into my man cave, it brings me back to a time when nobody's in the cemetery," he says. "I'm downstairs and everybody's alive. They're just not in the same room."

Read that one twice. We did.



DOWNSTAIRS AT JOE'S: MODEL KITS UP TOP, A MATCHBOX SHOW CASE, BOND CARS AND A SCHWINN PARKED IN FRONT. PHOTO: MORNIN' MASS



SHELF AFTER SHELF, CLOSING IN ON 4,000. PHOTO: MORNIN' MASS

SMALL CARS TO BIG CARS

His first real car was a black fastback Mustang on Cragars, which he bought from a buddy with his dad's help. It had no forward gears, so Joe drove it home in reverse and swapped in a new transmission himself. As he puts it, “That's when I learned how to pull wrenches.” Today his carport shelters a '38 Chevy Deluxe (“steers like a go-kart”), a straight-axle gasser Falcon (“a nasty little car”) and a Pro Street Pinto that came with a 460 big block.

For 14 years, though, the car that did the talking was DRAG'N A55. From 2010 to 2024, Joe's '55 Chevy gasser prowled the streets of Plymouth County: a ground-up build with a 489 big-block stroker, a straight axle and a four-speed. The joke was in the lettering. One side spelled A55 with fives. The other side spelled it with letters. More than a few couples argued about which one they'd seen, and plenty of guys told Joe the argument only ended once they went back and took pictures of both sides. “This car put me on the map,” he says. Small cars, then big cars. Then a whole parking lot full of them.

“HOW ABOUT NOT?”

Rebels & Rods started as a T-shirt. In 2019, a few guys were meeting on Sunday mornings in front of Mamma Mia's on Water Street, “chewing the fat, talking about life and talking about cars.” Joe wanted shirts, and shirts need a name. The first suggestion was the Old Farts.

> “I'm downstairs and everybody's alive. They're just not in the same room.”
>
> JOE FRATUS

“I said, how about not?” Joe recalls. “Just because we are old farts doesn't mean we have to advertise it.”

Instead he borrowed what his mother used to call him: a rebel, and she didn't always mean it as a compliment. Back then, the whole show was 20 cones and about 20 cars. Then



DRAG'N A55, THE '55 CHEVY GASSER THAT PROWLED PLYMOUTH COUNTY FROM 2010 TO 2024. PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE FRATUS



JOE AND THE GASSER FALCON. “A NASTY LITTLE CAR.” PHOTO: MORNIN' MASS



A SUNDAY AT THE EAST BAY GRILLE LOT, A LONG WAY FROM 20 CONES. PHOTO: JAMIE HALL

Scott Myers, owner of Local Roots, "kidnapped" Joe in his Escalade and drove him to the East Bay Grille lot to pitch a bigger spot. "Honestly, Scott deserves just as much credit as me," Joe says.



WHERE IT STARTED: AN EARLY REBELS & RODS SHIRT, WITH AN ENGINE IN THE MAYFLOWER. PHOTO: MORNIN' MASS

The first Sunday there, about 60 cars showed up; the next, about 100. When COVID shut down car shows everywhere in 2020, the Rebels kept going, by the book. "We weren't born because of COVID," Joe says, "but we grew because of it."

ROBIN HOOD, MINUS THE ROBBING

Early on, the club heard about two local teenagers who had lost both parents within a few months of each other. One of them needed money for driving school. By season's end, the Rebels had raised around $10,000.

"We wanted to help people, and that was instilled in us right from the very beginning," Joe says. In 2022, the giving became official. Today the club runs more than 35 shows a season, and its 501(c)(3), Rebels & Rods Hot Rod Club, aims to support children with disabilities, local veterans and young people who want to become mechanics.

ENGRAVED IN THE CORE

At the giving ceremonies, Joe is usually the one handing over the check, and he's likely to choke up before he finishes. "Hard shell outside, but he's definitely a soft guy," Scott says.

Pat Reilly grew up with Joe. "I've watched him grow up," Pat says. "He had a tough time when his parents passed away, but he's come a long way since. Sure, he gets a little crazy now and then." But what matters most? "He has a very good heart, and he'll do anything for anybody."

The kid who lost his family went on to build another, a few hundred people at a time.

At the heart of it now are the Core members: roughly 18 Rebel volunteers who show up nearly every Sunday from late April to early November. They set up the parking cones, the sound system, the merchandise and raffle tables, and plenty more to keep the show running. The club that turned down the Old Farts still doesn't take itself too seriously. And the club that raised $10,000 for two kids it had never met still asks the same question: Who needs help next?

"Joe really enjoys giving back and seeing people happy," says Rich McCarthy. "He's got a big heart, and he's passionate about the community. We will keep the Sundays open to everybody, show up early, set the cones and take care of the people who need it most, just the way Joe always has."

That's the part a T-shirt can't print. It gets passed down the way a father passed down a little Mustang: hand to hand.

PASSING THE KEYS

The 2026 season was Joe's last as president. He's handing the keys to new officers and the Core members, but he's not going far. He'll keep hosting the club's winter Hot Wheels shows, which you can follow on the Rebels & Rods (Official Site) Facebook

page.

"If it can turn a kid into wanting to do something with cars," he says, "to me that's worth everything in the world."

Come spring, the cars will roll back into East Bay Grille's lot, the cones will go up, and old friends will gather as they always have. Joe will be there, talking cars, catching up, and maybe watching some kid fall in love with cars.

Who knew that little Mustang toy his dad bought him in 1969 would grow into a parking lot full of cars, a community that feels like family, and something worth passing on? ■



ANOTHER WALL DOWNSTAIRS: THE MATCHBOX CARS, STILL ON THEIR CARDS. PHOTO: MORNIN' MASS

THE DETAILS

CLUB	Rebels & Rods Hot Rod Club
WHERE	East Bay Grille lot, 173 Water St., Plymouth, MA
WHEN	Sundays, 7 to 10 a.m., late April to early November, weather permitting
COST	Free to look; free to park your car in the show
RETURNS	Spring 2027 (2026 wrapped Nov. 15, the rain date for Nov. 8)
MORE	Rebels & Rods (Official Site) on Facebook

Quotes lightly edited for length and clarity.

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