

Investigators uncover risky repairs

SEATTLE, August 3, 1999 If you have an accident, you count on the auto body shop to fix your car. But the KING 5 Investigators learned that shops nationwide are making shoddy repairs and even cutting corners when it comes to safety.

“NOW THE SAFETY of my family is clearly at risk,” said Kelly Caviness after she was told her recently repaired car is not safe to operate.

After an accident in February, Kelly’s insurance company paid a body shop in Gig Harbor nearly \$14,000 to rebuild her 1998 Dodge Caravan. But according to a new estimate - it will take more than \$14,000 more to repair the rebuild.

Mike Harber is one of the most controversial figures in the auto rebuild industry. His Tacoma shop, Stroud’s, is in business to fix repairs already made by other shops.

“There is a responsibility morally and ethically to do a safe and a proper repair,” Harber said.

Some problems Harber pointed out on Kelly’s Caravan are obvious, such as paint left on the lights and the locks, even paint that dripped and dried, but the major problems - such as the frame - are hidden to all but experts. So, the KING 5 Investigators brought in an independent expert to take a look. (note: King 5 Investigators brought in Mark Olson of Future Forensics™ as an independant expert- Future Forensics™ is not affiliated with Stroud's Auto Rebuild, Mike Harber or Wreck Check®)

“The average consumer is going to have a difficult time looking at their vehicle because they don’t know what to look for,” said Mark Olson, the owner of Future Forensics, a Seattle firm that specializes in examining cars.

He confirmed the safety problems that Harber found, including a significant weld made in the wrong spot.

“It is wrong. If you look at the other side and see that the seat belt is anchored there,” Olson said.

Inside, Olson also found a main support beam cut and not repaired.

“It’s not one piece,” Olson pointed out, “I’m going to put thousands of pound of pressure - when it hits - that’s got to support that type of weight.”

Under the carpet Olson finds more problems, the unibody frame had not been fixed.

“Unacceptable,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to be driving this vehicle.”

KING 5 Investigator Duane Pohlman brought the Caravan and the concerns to the shop that did the work, Key Center Auto Body.

Body shop owner Charles Vasquez said he made honest mistakes.

“Are you proud of the work you did on this?” Pohlman asked.

“Well, yea I am. It wasn’t a bad job. If I did something wrong I’d be more than happy to fix it,” Vasquez answered.

“There are thousands of automobiles on the road right now that are death traps,” claims Harber.

He says he has hundreds of examples of substandard repairs, such as a 1998 Volvo S70. It was rebuilt for more than \$11,000 but damage remains.

“It still has a buckle right in this area here,” said Olson, “This wasn’t properly repaired. My guess is it probably needed a new frame rail.”

Plus the trunk still does not close properly.

“Would I want to have my three kids in this car, in a Volvo that’s renowned for safety? No,” Olson said.

Harber blames the problems on the insurance industry, which he says is constantly pressuring shops to keep costs of repairs down. Harber claims he is being punished because he refuses to cooperate with the insurance companies.

“The insurance companies have basically said that if we don’t cooperate and do things their way they will put us out of business,” Harber said. “The major insurers in our area have said those things. One of them put it in writing.”

Indeed, Pemco sent out a notice stating it will not allow any cars to be repaired at Stroud’s because of “higher overall cost of repair.” And some Stroud’s customers have signed declarations and affidavits stating Farmer’s Insurance “would not pay for repairs” at Stroud’s - even when a Stroud’s estimate was lower.

Farmer’s sent KING 5 News a letter stating it “would not intentionally disparage a shop ... nor discourage customers from taking a car anywhere they choose...”

The insurance companies deny Mike Harber’s accusations. Allstate, Farmers and Pemco all informed the KING 5 Investigators in writing saying they do not sacrifice quality by keeping costs down.

KING 5’s Pohlman tried to talk with an Allstate manager who came to look at an Acura at Stroud’s Body Shop.

“No comment,” was his response.

The Acura was rebuilt by Hinshaw’s for nearly \$10,000, but Hinshaw’s admits a key part - called an upper tie bar - was not replaced, even though it was charged on the final bill. A week later, Allstate bought the Acura’s owner a new car.

Meanwhile, Kelly Caviness and her Caravan are still waiting.

“I did everything I could to put my family in a safe car. And for a body shop to take away that safety that I paid for in this car, I think is inexcusable,” Caviness said.

All of the shops interviewed by the Investigators say they stand behind their work and most offer lifetime warranties, but all admitted the job should be done right the first time.

Experts say wrong repairs are difficult to locate since they are often hidden and they add if you are concerned, you should take the vehicle to an outside expert

Taken From King 5 web Site

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