

Employee Spotlight: José Valdez

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Most evenings, and certainly most weekends, find José Valdez in his garage, intensely focused on his hobby of refurbishing classic cars, preferably from the 1930s to early 1960s. By day a technician in the Nuclear Engineering and Nonproliferation Division, Valdez enjoys all aspects of the car restoration process, from finding an old, beat-up wreck sitting neglected in someone's backyard to putting the poor thing on his jack stand to see how much work it will take to make the car run again and turn it back into the beauty it had once been.

"I used to help my dad in his body shop when I was a kid," Valdez explains, "and today my brother James is a car mechanic and my brother Bento runs a paint and body shop like our dad. Cars are in our blood."

Valdez tends to be drawn to the rarer and less popular of the classic cars, which makes it more difficult to find the vehicles and parts. But Valdez likes the hunt and he has one distinct advantage over car restorers from the East and West Coast: The dry air of the arid desert Southwest makes it much more likely to find non-rusty specimens.

“What is really exciting to me is having a new part come in and seeing whether it will work,” says Valdez with a smile. “That’s the real fun. It’s so much easier now with the internet instead of having to hang around junk yards and swap meets.”

Car community

Valdez is part of a large community of automobile restorers from all over the country and world, people he does not necessarily know but who can be counted on to help nonetheless. “One time I bought parts from a scammer in Houston,” Valdez recalls. “He took money from everyone but never sent what had been paid for. Some local car aficionados heard of the situation, went over to the man’s house and got our money back. ‘We don’t want this crook to make Houston look bad,’ they said. I sent them New Mexico chile powder as a thank you.”

For a while Valdez pursued fast cars and raced at the Albuquerque Dragway. But nowadays he prefers family-oriented, picnic-type car shows that offer neither adrenaline rushes nor trophies. “I like visiting with my friends more than being competitive,” Valdez notes, “and I like cars that you can actually drive, not getting paranoid over every speck of dirt under the hood.”

On Sundays Valdez and his fiancée, Leslie Gallegos, take the latest ugly-duckling-turned-into-a-swan for a test spin, going for a long drive to the mountains or down to Albuquerque.

José Valdez works for the Nuclear Engineering and Nonproliferation Division’s Safeguards Science and Technology group.

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More

- To tour Prince Rainier III’s Classic Car Museum in Monaco, watch YouTube’s [World’s Greatest Car Collection](#).
- To learn more about car restoration, see YouTube’s [Restoration Blog: 1910 Model O#White Steam Car](#), which is part of the [Jay Leno’s Garage](#) video series.

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