

WELL-POLISHED MACHINE

THIS FFA MEMBER BUILT A HIGH-DEMAND CAR-DETAILING BUSINESS.

— By Lauren Denton



Dawson Boys

The COVID-19 pandemic taught the world the art of the pivot. For Dawson Boys, the forced change of plans made him a successful entrepreneur. When his fast-food job took a pause, the then 18-year-old junior at Stewardson-Strasburg High School in Stewardson, Ill., used his newfound free time to monetize a passion project — working on cars.

“I was born and raised in a shop,” says Boys. In addition to building his own race truck and restoring cars with his dad, “I always had an immaculate car,” he adds. “I thought, ‘People would pay money for that.’”

He tested that theory by starting a car-detailing business while also mowing lawns. In just a few months, he’d built a solid customer base and transitioned entirely to his one-person operation. “I just started grinding it out,” he says. “I worked a lot of long days.” It paid off: In the first year, DB’s Auto Detailing raked in upward of \$15,000.

“It was really just a side hustle that I never expected to blow up,” says Boys, who logged the business as a supervised agricultural experience (SAE) during his senior year. The key? “If you make a dozen people happy, you’ll make 100 people happy. They won’t stop talking about the work you do.”

Boys’ business is a case study in

word-of-mouth marketing. His first customers were people he raced with, which included a local farmer who also wanted his tractor and tillage tools cleaned. That farmer’s friends then called Boys to polish their trucks, and friends of those friends wanted pristine vehicles, too. “I eventually had to turn people away,” he says.

“Networking was so important to help kick off my business,” he adds. “You have to have people who believe in you, and that’s powerful to sell them on ideas.” That principle also bolstered his FFA experience. “I’m a big people person. The people I’ve met through FFA have helped my business tremendously.”

Now a freshman at Southern Illinois University, more than two hours from home, Boys has paused his business, except for during breaks from school. As a business finance major considering business law, he’ll likely stay close to entrepreneurship for the long haul.

“I just love being able to look at something I built, and that money in my bank account is because of me, coming to me for what I did,” he says. “A hamburger can be made the same way by anyone, but a personal service is just you — and that’s really special to me.”

For ideas and inspiration for starting your own SAE, visit SAEForAll.org.

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