

BUILDING CARS OF THE FUTURE AT GM

By Erika Finnimore

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At General Motors Corp. in Detroit, one University of Central Florida engineering student is designing innovative cars that will be hidden from the public for at least four more years.

“I’m afraid that all of the components on the current concept cars are pretty original. If I was to share it, I’d have to kill you,” joked Austin Newman, a senior Mechanical Engineering major.

The Palm City, Fla., native is spending the summer interning with GM’s Advanced Vehicle Development division, learning how to apply engineering skills to problem solving. He’s working on a team that is helping to build concept cars, creative vehicle prototypes that could potentially become production cars if they receive enough positive public feedback.

“Not only has Austin had to apply engineering skills like force analysis and material selection to a real-world application, he’s had to do this while facing very real and tight time constraints, and in instances in which there isn’t an answer in the back of a textbook to check his work against,” said Tom Lobkovich, technical fellow in GM’s Concept & Vehicle Integration department.

The GM team builds the cutting-edge cars based on three-dimensional images sketched by a design team. Since beginning his internship, Newman has had hands-on experience, from building structures to installing interior and exterior features and gadgets.

“It’s a lot of responsibility to make sure all of the showpieces on the car work,” Newman said. “The work I’m doing is just like what real engineers do. The fact that I don’t have a degree yet but have been given that responsibility is very rewarding.”

He’s also learning about the inner workings of one of the world’s biggest automakers: Among other things, Newman has seen test cars in action at GM’s Milford Proving Grounds, the vehicle testing area closed to the public that provided the inspiration for Test Track, the attraction at Disney World’s EPCOT theme park.

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In the future, Newman hopes to work with alternative fuel inventions. A car buff from a young age, Newman realized at age 13 that he had a future in the automobile industry after rebuilding two Porsches with his dad. He still works in the garage with his dad when he's not helping to fuel innovative ideas at GM.

The GM opportunity followed a chance encounter at the North American International Auto Show in January in Detroit. Newman met an executive at the GM Renaissance Center just a few buildings down from the show. After a short conversation, Newman's resume was passed through many hands, and he started the internship in May.

"This internship has inspired me to learn as much as I can from UCF's engineering program," said Newman. "We're designing cars that people eventually drive, so I see how what I'm learning in my classes can be applied to the real world."

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