



"Project Gladiator" is a student build of a 1967 Jeep Gladiator pickup designed to get the next generation interested in classic vehicles and the performance aftermarket.



# Project Gladiator

**An old farm truck introduces students to the fun of the performance aftermarket.**

**BY JULIE KNUDSON**

**L**EANN WILLIAMS has a number of affiliations with the performance aftermarket, including memberships in SEMA's Hot Rod Industry Alliance, Businesswomen's Network and youth marketing groups.

She's also a math teacher at Yucaipa High School in Southern California, and would like to see more young folks getting interested in cars. She recalls the days when Friday and Saturday nights were for cruising, while lamenting the fact that kids

today are often more interested in poking around on computers than in getting their hands dirty.

It's a concern she shared with a cadre of enthusiast friends, who as a group decided to try to find a way to turn the tide.

"There are a few other motor heads on our campus, and we got together and were noticing a trend in our students," Williams says. "The kids weren't really excited about much of anything. They were just going along—they didn't have any goals, they weren't passionate and they lacked drive."

Enter a 1967 Jeep Gladiator pickup, which Williams and her husband, Rob, purchased in early 2013 with the intention of gradually restoring and "doing something kind of cool with it."

Through the persistence and determination of Williams and several of her car-loving colleagues, that venerable Jeep is now Project Gladiator, a joint student-instructor effort of education and experience that will turn a well-used truck into a street rod.

"We thought if we could get a handful of kids that would be really excited about doing something like this, it would give them an opportunity to see something



Math teacher and performance enthusiast Leann Williams took the lead on the build as a way to inspire students to dream big and teach them the benefits of teamwork and dedication to a project.



through,” Williams says. “They could see this old farm truck transformed by their hands and their hard work into something that was really cool.”

And they won’t be the only ones seeing the fruits of their efforts. Project Gladiator and its team of supporters is set to rock this year’s SEMA Show as an educational exhibit.

### Nothing New

The Williamses have a long history in the aftermarket and performance sectors. Among a host of restoration projects was a six-cylinder Mustang that Rob purchased for Leann, but that she wasn’t content to let rest as a simple commuter car.

“I wanted to make it cooler,” she says. The car was eventually turned into a Shelby Terlingua, and it was the first taste Williams had of linking a project with SEMA.

“Ford’s display was looking for a whole bunch of Mustangs and we got kind of scooped up into that,” Williams recalls.

“They liked it so well they wanted it back the next year.”

That first SEMA experience taught Williams about the value of sponsors. There wasn’t time with the Terlingua project to pursue those types of supporting relationships, but they have played key roles in subsequent builds.

During a search for tires shortly before Williams’s second SEMA Show, she recalls a critical piece of advice she received. “Somebody said, ‘If you’re going to SEMA, a lot of tire manufacturers will give you tires.’ My ears perked up, because tires are expensive,” she says with a laugh.

Sponsor support has been an important facet of Project Gladiator from the beginning, and under Williams’ guidance, the relationships have taken on an added dimension.

Because the educational value of the project is its true purpose—a goal that marries closely to the efforts SEMA is making to bring new blood into the industry—Williams is working to display the



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Williams has already heard from the parents of student participants who can't stop talking about the build.

truck at the annual show under its own banner. The project will likely be at the rolling chassis stage, and the team intends to bring along those products that are still waiting to be installed.

Students will also be on hand "to describe what it is that they've done," Williams says, a bonus that will no doubt set it apart. Her hope is that the kids' perspectives on the project—its challenges and its rewards—will be compelling and instructive to other young people interested in the field.

The students behind Project Gladiator come from a variety of backgrounds. A dozen attend area high schools, including some from Williams' own Yucaipa High School (which has no affiliation with the project). Others are students at area community colleges, trade and vocational schools.

A closer look at the demographics reveals other interesting details. "It's about



The project will likely be at the "rolling chassis" stage when it appears at the SEMA Show in hopes of gaining the attention of like-minded students who want to learn more about the industry.



## *The team has committed to learn all they can about the various products used on the truck as part of a year-long marketing effort.*

half girls and half guys," Williams says.

The positive effects the project has had on the students have blown apart any old-school assumptions, and students of both genders have expressed such a passion for Project Gladiator that parents regularly approach Williams to regale her with tales of excited kids who talk for hours in the evening about the build.

"We're starting to have that kind of effect," she says. "We're lighting the fires of these young people."

### **Team Effort**

In addition to Williams' direction, a handful of other experienced folks are also helping the team tackle Project Gladiator.

Chris Weleff, an auto shop teacher, and Jimmy Nieto, a paint and body expert, offer their time and insight to guide the kids through the more difficult phases of the build. Others have also stepped in to help in specific areas, including a fabrica-

tion guru who is a friend of Williams.

"The idea here is that, underneath the watchful eye of these master professionals, these kids are going to learn a bunch of stuff," Williams explains. Not only will the team develop an understanding of the car and its components, they'll also get some real-world lessons about working together and taking pride in their work.

Another valuable lesson is on the way for members of Project Gladiator. In exchange for their sponsors' support, the team has committed to learn all they can about the various products used on the truck as part of a year-long marketing effort.

"Our sponsors are providing us with a lot of sales literature, and as soon as this thing is a rolling chassis, it's going to be out around the Southern California area," Williams says. The car—along with a rotating assortment of team members—will be on display at shows throughout the area.

Products that haven't yet been added to the truck will also be on hand, with the kids serving as de facto sales reps for the supporting sponsors' wares.

"It's a trade-off," Williams explains. "We got some stuff for either a discount or for free, and the sponsors get us promoting their products for a year."

Some of Project Gladiator's sponsors have worked with Williams on previous builds, but she added a number of newcomers for her latest endeavor.

"We've encapsulated what the project is, what it is we're trying to do, and we've contacted folks to offer people an opportunity to get involved with this," she says of her sponsorship recruiting efforts. Project Gladiator has joined SEMA as a member, with a focus on education for kids, and some of the sponsors were contacted through that channel. For others, old-fashioned email and word-of-mouth got the message through.



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# Project Gladiator

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SMS Headliners  
Stage 8 Fasteners  
Steel-Mate Automotive  
Street Rod Engineering  
Tanks Inc.  
Taylor Cable  
Vintage Air

## TEAM MEMBERS

### Teaching Professionals

Chris Weleff – master mechanic and school auto shop instructor  
Jimmy Nieto – paint and body work  
Leann Williams – project manager, SEMA, Events and Shows, mechanic  
Joe Madore – welding and fabrication  
Rob Williams – promotions/sponsorship manager, mechanic instructor

### Student Team Members

Steven Slayer – computer graphic rendering  
Elizabeth Williams – office manager  
Savanna Groza – artist rendering  
Ciara Nordenstrom – social media  
Mitchell Camps – audio sound systems  
Eric Petta – lead mechanic  
Devon Thomas Mosley-Johnson – mechanic  
Diego Holt – mechanic  
Tyler Flores – mechanic  
Vanessa Huzar – mechanic  
Lissette Fritchman – mechanic  
Susette Fritchman – mechanic  
Loraine Bristol – mechanic  
Ricky Patterson – mechanic  
Tim Noden – mechanic  
Julio Hernandez – mechanic  
Aaron Garcia – mechanic  
Morgan Ward – mechanic  
Jordan Daniel – mechanic



Along with learning restoration skills, the students are also studying up on their sponsors' products as a way to increase their understanding of the market in general.

In addition to the face-to-face representation that will happen at area events, the sponsors also enjoy marketing links planted directly where the next generation of buyers is hanging out: Facebook. A section of the team's Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/projectgladiator](http://www.facebook.com/projectgladiator)) is dedicated to the sponsors, and site visitors can click the links to learn more about the products or to be connected directly to the sponsor company's page.

With over 2,300 Likes, regular updates to Project Gladiator's online content have kept folks updated and engaged.

"Facebook is becoming another way to market stuff," Williams says. "It makes a connection between our projects and our sponsors."

## The Specs

Project Gladiator will be a total body-off frame restoration. The Jeep's frame will be modified to remove the front and rear differentials and all related leaf springs and mounts, along with the stock shock towers and mounts, steering components and unneeded crossmembers.

The new front Ultra Mustang II cross-member and rear 4-bar suspension units supplied by Street Rod Engineering, plus a Flaming River power steering rack and aluminum fully adjustable coil-over shocks with chrome springs provided by QA1 Motorsports, will be welded in. A rebuilt and powder-coated Dana 44 with an Auburn Gear HP positraction unit is destined for the rear end, and will be rounded out with Currie Ford 9-inch big end bearings and Currie performance axles.

A Chevrolet 350 with a balanced rotating assembly, rebuilt by the Yucaipa High School Auto Shop class, will be the Jeep's heart. The engine will sport a Holley Ultra Street Avenger carburetor, Procomp Electronics aluminum heads with stainless steel valves and stainless steel roller rockers.

Visual pop will be provided by polished, "Gladiator"-engraved, Holley-provided Mickey Thompson valve covers. Hedman shorty Tight Tubes headers will be married to 2.5-inch exhaust components and a MagnaFlow stainless steel Tru-X Pipe Kit, stainless steel Custom Builders Kit, two



polished stainless steel universal mufflers and a pair of polished 3.5-inch stainless steel exhaust tips. Performance Distributors provided a number of cool engine items including one of its DUI performance distributors, a Mr. AMP alternator and a Dyna-Batt battery. Royal Purple lubricants were used throughout the project.

A rebuilt Turbo 350 transmission with a Lokar floor-mounted 23-inch automatic shifter will get all that power to the Vintiques Smoothie Full Chrome wheels and Firestone Destination LE2 tires.

The cab and all sheet metal will be stripped before getting some noise, vibration and heat control courtesy of a QuietRide Solutions full cab insulation kit and under-hood kit that includes a "Gladiator" embossed shield. The truck's bed will become a flatbed, using polished walnut bed wood from Gladiator Bedwood, Williams' own company. The wood finish will be offset by a polished aluminum frame.

Destined to look great coming or going, Project Gladiator will sport a classic chrome front grille and front bumper, along with a polished aluminum "Gladiator"-engraved rear bumper provided by Taylor Cable's Jeep parts. Leather bucket seats and door panels, plus a leather and polished-walnut console, provide a final touch of class inside.

Project Gladiator wouldn't be complete without a worthy audio and interior electronics setup. A 6-speaker crossover system with an 8-inch powered subwoofer will be complemented by a RetroSound Model Two radio featuring an AM/FM tuner, RDS, Bluetooth A2DP and hands-free operation. The system will be iPod/iPhone-compatible and will also have a USB input and subwoofer output.

Also, a rear-camera parking assist with on-dash display, tire pressure monitoring system, remote start and power door lock system will be provided by Steelmate. Together with a Dakota Digital instrument cluster and accessory modules and a wiring harness provided by Painless Performance Products, the Gladiator will be one high-brow warrior—and a way for students to learn to love the performance aftermarket.

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