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PHOTO BY RIP STELL

David Miller of Trinity Restoration talks about the grand opening of his new \$3.5 million paint, body and mechanical facility to be completed by June 30 in Tulsa. Miller plans on selling custom muscle cars on the Internet, as well.

Tulsa auto restorer branches into muscle car construction

Owner Miller builds national e-company as his Trinity Restoration completes \$4M expansion to triple revenue

BY KIRBY LEE DAVIS
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TULSA — As a dozen construction workers strode around him, David Miller turned his eyes from the wall of glass fronting his hill-top building to the row of south Memorial Drive auto dealerships below his parking lot.

"There's literally a dozen dealers here, and none of them have body shops," said the owner of Tulsa-based Trinity Restoration. "They have service shops, but they can't have paint or body shops."

That promises instant demand for his \$2.5-million paint, body and mechanical shop, which contractor Rupe Building Co. of Tulsa is rushing to complete by June 30. Having built relationships with several of the dealers, Miller expects to draw \$6 million in revenue from his new 25,611-square-foot operation in its first year, which would triple the size of his three-year-old company.

But even as he daily dons a hard hat to aid in the work, Miller is developing another project even closer to his automotive heart: brandnewmusclecar.com, a national company building custom muscle cars.

"It amazes me that nobody has thought of

this before," said Miller, an enthusiast who owns a restored '69 Camaro Z-28. "It's an online car dealership, that's what it is."

As with many restoration companies, Trinity contracts employee time to build kit or custom cars on demand. Since it charges \$50 an hour for labor, about \$100 less than the going rate in California, Miller said customers found they could hire Trinity to build the cars, ship them on an 18-wheeler for about \$1,500, and still save money.

His new business will milk that option. Using a Web site designed by David Giacometti, president and chief executive of Shark Studios of Manhattan Beach, Calif. — Shark Studios also designed trinitytulsa.com — the site brandnewmusclecar.com will allow customers to custom order a Camaro, Mustang, '57 Chevy Belair or a Corba kit car, giving them a laundry list of choices between original spec parts or modern. Trinity imports the bodies on demand from Taiwan, stamped according to original manufacturer designs.

"There's a huge market out there for old cars," he said, noting how even kit cars replicating the classics may command auction prices of \$100,000. Originals may easily double that or more.

Even with the body costing \$10,000-plus, Trinity can often complete a vehicle for \$80,000 to 100,000, with a turnaround time of less than four months. At that rate, Miller said a customer may be able to order a vehicle from Trinity, then turn around and sell it at a profit.

Miller has already proven the market exists. Although it hasn't marketed the service extensively, his company has 15 such construction projects going on right now.

"I give them my receipts, and they agree to a 30-percent markup," said Miller. Able to monitor progress over the Web, clients pay for the projects in advance. "They get a bill every Monday, and since they see the progress, they know there's no fluff. And if the system fails — say I lose a receipt for something — guess who loses? Me. Because I lost the receipt."

Miller, whose firm starred in a reality television pilot for MTV last year, hopes to start this company in July, following its announcement in *Hot Rod* magazine.

"That alone would probably get us a dozen orders, at \$100,000 a pop," he said.

Launching brandnewmusclecar.com will mark the third major expansion this year for Miller.

Since paying \$500,000 for Trinity three years ago, the 38-year-old former telecom executive augmented the paint shop with a collision shop, restoration shop and dealer shop, all based around Tulsa's older auto row at 46th Street and Memorial. His annual revenue jumped from \$1 million to \$2 million last year, with a projected \$3 million expected this year. His employment rose from three to 20.

Miller just acquired the Dent Doctor franchise for Tulsa, adding paintless dent repair to his repertoire. With his marketing savvy and company synergies, Miller expects

that business to double its revenues to \$1 million over the next 12 months.

But the big push will come with the paint, body and mechanical shop, which with land and equipment represents a \$4 million investment. Miller plans to hire a staff of 36 for that 2.5-acre operation, with salaries ranging from \$50,000 to \$100,000.

As his first foray into south Tulsa, opening the largest facility of its kind in the area, he expects these expanded services will attract new customers for all of Trinity's operations.

Miller has lined up a monster grand opening for the new business. Trinity will offer not only a 200-car auto show, live music, and food, but appearances by DuPont's Nascar racer, ExxonMobil's Indy 500 entry, the Chrome Shop Mafia from CMT's *Trick My Truck* show and noted custom-care designer Chip Foote, who will arrive by helicopter.

The building's stylish design by architects Brad Lechtenburger and Tom Daman also offers a dramatic marketing presence, sitting atop a hill with a commanding view of the Memorial intersection with the Creek Turnpike, seen by 32,000 passing vehicles daily. Miller will augment that nightly when the shop's bright red neon trim comes on.

"Isn't this beautiful?" he said, admiring not just the wooded vale around him, but the building taking shape beneath him. "Some of my customers said they were surprised to see something this beautiful in Tulsa. They expected to see it in Dallas. But I think it looks good right here."