



PAYING IT FORWARD

NHRA SUPER-SPONSOR TERRY CHANDLER LIVES HER DREAM WHILE HELPING OTHERS

BY STEVEN COLE SMITH



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THE ARGUMENT BEGAN almost from the moment we sat down with Terry Chandler during the NHRA Gatornationals at Auto Plus Raceway in Gainesville, Fla. It continued the whole weekend.

Said Chandler, repeatedly, "I'm so boring. Sorry, but there's really nothing about me that is interesting."

Said Autoweek, repeatedly, "We disagree."

You decide.

Chandler, 63, looks far more like a Cracker Barrel hostess than the backer of two Top Fuel Funny Cars running the entire NHRA 24-race Mello Yello schedule.

During a break in the Saturday eliminations, Chandler served up cake in the team hospitality tent in honor of the retirement of her personal pilot. (She and her husband, Doug, have a Pilatus, a Hawker 4000 and a

Falcon 900. Did we mention she is not a Cracker Barrel hostess?)

So far, you might be tempted to agree with Chandler: The NHRA pits are full of well-heeled racers. So what if she funds a pair of Funny Cars? Plenty of businessmen and -women put their company names on the sides of cars and write it off as a business advertising expense.

Here's the difference: On the side of driver Jack Beckman's car is the Infinite Hero Foundation, a nonprofit funding multiple programs for former soldiers and their families with physical or mental challenges.

On the side of Tommy Johnson Jr.'s car: Make-A-Wish, the organization that grants the wish of a child diagnosed with a grave or life-threatening illness.

According to those in the know, two tier-one Funny Cars cost between \$4 million and \$6 million to operate at the top

Chandler sponsors the Dodge Chargers of Jack Beckman, top, and Tommy Johnson Jr., and adorns the cars with two of her favorite charities—Make-A-Wish and Infinite Hero.

level for a season. And all that comes from the pockets of Chandler's jeans, which she buys at Walmart. Not a penny of the money donated from people to the two charities goes into the operation of the cars. They are seven-figure billboards, taking the message to race fans each year in person and on TV.

In return, Chandler makes one demand: She likes to stand at the starting line, wearing a team shirt, and cheer. Not against anyone—she isn't like that—but for her "family" at the racetrack.

So where do "boring" people like Chandler come from? In her case, New

Mexico, where she was raised poor, caring for her quadriplegic mother, left that way as the result of a botched operation. Her father scratched for a living in the oil fields as a pumper. "There was no money back then," Chandler recalled.

But there would be, later.

Chandler's dad, John R. Gray, started his business as a one-man operation. In 1974, he partnered with another oilman, Mack Chase, and they founded Marbob Energy. Together, they began working the Yeso Formation in southeast New Mexico, a field few thought was worth the trouble. It soon became the state's largest producer.

Chase then began his own company, leaving Marbob in the hands of Gray, who died in 2001. Chandler's younger brother, Johnny Gray, became the president; Chandler's husband was vice president. In 2010, Concho Resources bought Marbob for \$1.65 billion, split between Johnny Gray and his big sister.

So how did Chandler get into drag racing? Johnny Gray was a lifelong racer. "As a kid," she said, "that's all he cared about." Her brother raced oval tracks, dirt, even NASCAR, "but when he said he wanted to race a Top Fuel Funny Car, well, that about scared me to death," Chandler said. "But family is extremely important to me, and that was his passion, so I supported him the best I could."

In the early days, she went to a lot of her brother's local races, even helping him sell T-shirts so they could afford to buy gas to go home from the track. One night years ago, at the old Longhorn Speedway in Austin, Texas, she was all the pit crew he had. He came flying off the track and yelled, "Check the oil pan! Check the oil pan!"

"I never dove under a car so fast in my life," Chandler said. "But then I came up and said, 'What's an oil pan?' He took off, threw gravel all over me. Unmerciful! But when we got home that night, I learned what an oil pan was!"

Her brother insisted she start coming to some of the big-time drag races. All her life, she had stayed near home, caring for people, because that's what she did. But with the business sold and her parents gone, there was no one left to care for. "You're about to see," Gray told his sister, "that there's a whole different world out there."

So she started going to the drag races. "I saw so many places I had never seen. I realized the whole world isn't a desert!"



Her brother retired a couple of years ago as a Funny Car driver with Don Schumacher Racing. When he left, Chandler decided she wasn't quite ready to give up drag racing: "I'd become so close to all the people at DSR."

She talked it over with her husband, whose passion is competition shooting; Chandler doesn't much care for that sport. "And Doug doesn't like drag racing. At all. 'Hurry up and wait!' he says about it." But if that's what she wanted to do, she had his blessing.

She began sponsoring a car part time—it turned into full time and two cars. To say it wasn't a solid financial investment is an understatement; despite having two charities on the cars, it is not tax deductible. "I'm just trying to pay it forward," she said. "I've been blessed. And I just want to help."

And it's genuine. "You should see her interact with the Make-A-Wish kids," said Jeff Wolf, who handles communications for DSR. "When she is with them, no one else exists."

She has gained respect from other teams. "The Lord has blessed her financially, and she is just giving it back," said John Force, a team owner and 16-time Funny

Chandler, above with Don Schumacher Racing Top Fuel driver Antron Brown, is a cheerleader for the NHRA and rarely too far from the starting line on race day.

Car champ. "To build programs that allow Tommy Johnson Jr. and Jack Beckman to race—she's just awesome. She is promoting great charities and she's a real blessing for our sport."

It would be nice to say that her drivers, Johnson Jr. and Beckman, squared off in the finals at the Gatornationals, but that didn't happen.

How about the next-best thing? At the next race, the NHRA Four-Wide Nationals at Charlotte, N.C.'s zMAX Dragway, Beckman—the 2012 Funny Car champ, a former U.S. Air Force sergeant and a cancer survivor—won the Funny Car title in his Infinite Hero 2015 Mopar Dodge Charger.

"I love to race," said Chandler. "And bless my heart, I love to win. These gold-darned cars, I just love 'em." Even the oil pan. And yes, she knows where that is. 🏆

Learn more about Infinite Hero at infinitehero.org and Make-A-Wish at wish.org