



The 2011 Chevy Sonic "Boom" concept was also at the event.



2013 Dodge SRT Viper at Big 3's Innovation/Design event.

Big 3 Show Area High School Students Automotive Career Opportunities

by Irena Granaas

Designers and engineers from GM, Ford and Chrysler were on hand June 4 to showcase some exceptional samples of their work at the "Where Innovation Meets Design" auto showcase at the Utica Center for Science and Industry (UCSI).

The automotive design reps interacted freely with Utica Community Schools and about 1,000 UCSI students from freshmen to seniors at the event, which included demonstrations of concept sketching and detailing by hand, and using software.

Event organizer Harry Istok, who retired from Malow Junior High School in Utica in 2012, said the annual auto showcase program began in 2006 as something for his drafting students.

The first automaker to participate was GM. Ford came on board in 2009, and Chrysler has been part of the event since 2012.

"This is the only event like this in the world geared toward K-12," said Istok. "We're very fortunate to have all of the car companies in the area."

Joe Dehner, head of design for Dodge and Ram, was one of the key designers attending the June 4 event at UCSI. Dehner said Chrysler brought 13 design concepts to the event and had 45 employees taking part.

Featured Chrysler vehicles on display included a 2013 SRT Viper, 2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee Trailhawk II concept, a 2013 Jeep Wrangler Stitch concept, a 2013 Ram Power Wagon and a historic 1964 Chrysler Turbine.

"We see it as an opportunity to make students aware of Chrysler design and engineering opportunities, not only with the cars but with our employees," he said.

Of the employees, Dehner added, "These aren't just pretty faces. These are the people who've actually worked on these concepts."

Chrysler, Ford and GM, had design staff members holding demonstrations inside the UCSI building for high school and junior high students from area schools, doing live sketching by hand and using software for both the interior and exterior auto design process.

"The kids are pretty impressed by that. We actually give them a chance to 'fly the plane,'" Dehner said.

He noted that Chrysler's participating isn't just something where they "come and go," but that the automaker works with major engineering and design schools like Lawrence Technological University and the College for Creative Studies in Detroit to help students determine what their options are if they are interested in pursuing a design or engineering career.

"We hope to hook the kids up with appropriate opportunities," he said.

Greg Cummings, GM group manager and superintendent of digital measurement, GM Design Fabrication Operations, said he attended a parent-teacher conference at his son's school (Malow) and left with an idea, later

launching the "Where Innovation Meets Design" auto showcase.

Cummings said this is one of several GM outreach programs. Some others are Career Day for Scholastic Arts Gold Key Winners, where GM works with high school and middle school students, and "You Make a Difference," where GM and the College for Creative Studies (CCS) works with Detroit Public School students.

"It's programs like these that help us connect with high school and college-level students, their parents, educators and counselors, to make them aware of scholarship opportunities and also the diverse career opportunities out there," he said.

Cummings added that while there's been much focus in the educational world on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), kids with artistic talent have a place in the auto industry as well.

"All cars start with a sketch," he said.

Inside the UCSI facility, students watched short videos and live demonstrations. Creative Designer Everard Scott was one of the Chrysler staff members interacting with students in small groups, highlighting how he uses a powerful software program, Photoshop, in the process of creating new designs.

"I've been using the program since 2001 and I'm still learning new things about it," he told the students who were watching him work on a design concept on a digital flat screen.

Ford Chief Designer Greg Cummings said, "We think it's important, especially for young people, to know this career is out there."

"When I was in junior high and high school, I didn't know cars were designed by art students. I thought they were designed by engineers. I even went to engineering school for two years before I transferred . . . The funny thing is, my mother knew all along I needed to go to art school."

The half-day program definitely gave participating students food for thought. John Parke, 15, a freshman at Heritage Junior High School in Sterling Heights, came away with a positive impression after checking out the cars. Parke also attends UCSI half-days.

"All of the cars are really new. I hope to own some of them one day," he commented.

Parke found the "Where Innovation Meets Design" program inspiring, noting, "It's definitely rekindled my love for engineering."

Asked about his view on the refreshed Chrysler design DNA on display, Parke indicated he liked what he saw.

"They're a lot nicer than they used to be, and they're starting to make more muscle cars," he said, adding that he particularly liked the Shelby Cobra concept, with its big engine and vivid exterior paint job.

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