

Making It

TWO PALS START THEIR OWN 'MEALS ON WHEELS'

By Elizabeth Chang

FOR JEFF KORNS OF POTOMAC, a face-saving way of dealing with an unfinished car restoration has blossomed into a second avocation.

Jeff's wife, Elizabeth, owned a '71 Volkswagen Super Beetle when they married in 1986. Jeff had told her he would restore the car. "Taking it apart is the easy part," he says. "Getting it back to brand-new is the really long and hard and arduous part." Over the years, there were a lot of distractions: his business (Battery Warehouse in Rockville), house and son, Jonathan, now 15, all needed attention. The car, minus one of its windows, just sat there.

In 2004, Jeff, 53, bought a huge homemade grill — a converted 275-gallon recycled fuel oil tank — to indulge in one of his other passions: barbecuing. He was pondering how to move the grill when his eye landed on the new chassis he had bought for the Volkswagen. Once he had installed the grill in the Beetle shell, he had not only saved himself from "the humiliating defeat of junking the car I couldn't finish," he also had a proposal for a new business with a catchy name: Carbecue.

Jeff's friend Mike Jewell, the former owner of Mustang Sally's bar and restaurant in Wheaton, appreciated the beauty of the idea. "I said that's pure genius; let's get it going," says Mike, 43, who lives in Olney and now owns Art and Mirror Hanging LLC.

He and Jeff held their first Carbecue event in July 2004, a picnic for Youth Services International, and neither knew what he was getting into. "To me, it was more like a hobby. I might work a couple of weekends a year, cook some food out of the car," Mike says. But Carbecue's popularity has snowballed from a handful of jobs that summer, despite its lack of advertising (of course, the VWs themselves serve as billboards, as they are towed by Chevy Suburbans to events. "People will pace us and cause traffic jams," says Mike.)

In their busy season, from March to November, the partners spend almost every weekend grilling food for crowds of about 75 to 200 people at events such as corporate get-togethers and birthday parties (they also donate time to charities such as the Children's Inn at NIH). They say they have to turn down about as many jobs as they accept. Carbecue charges \$15 to \$20 a head for meals that include three meats, prepared on grills fueled by charcoal and wood chips, and three sides.

Colette Thibodeau of Bethesda has hired Carbecue to cater school and pool events. She says the fact that the "phenomenal" food is cooked out of cars, "is sort of like the *pièce de résistance*. You just have to have fun."

Jeff and Mike staff most of the events themselves, having "refined it to a finely tuned German engineering machine, like the



DRIVEN TO SUCCEED: Mike Jewell, Jeff Korns and one of their Carbecue grills.

car is," Jeff says. Jeff's wife and Mike's girlfriend are both very supportive, and Jeff's son helps grill.

Last year, Carbecue brought in about \$46,000, about 60 percent of which was profit, and all of which has gone back into the business. Mike and Jeff now have five VWs parked outside their houses, three operational and two awaiting restoration.

The partners find themselves at a crossroads. If they want to grow, they need to bring in other people, though they worry about losing control of the quality. "I think that there's a restaurant concept here," Jeff says, envisioning the car grills in open kitchens. But for now, they are relishing what they're doing and what they have achieved. "I had to tow the grill, and it came to this," Jeff says, laughing.

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