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Auto-theft fighter is man on mission: Former car dealer turns his energies to reducing losses

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Angela Hall, Journal Staff Writer*

Anybody and everybody is fair game when Ken Haywood wants people to know about the seriousness of auto theft.

"I don't mind picking up a phone to call a chief of police," says Haywood.

The same goes for the federal justice minister. "Anne McLellan is someone who knows me as Ken 'Auto Theft' Haywood," he says.

Almost 800,000 cars stolen in the last five years were not recovered, and that's just one of the statistics Haywood says he'd like to see change.

Haywood is the driving force behind an auto-theft symposium in Edmonton this week that brings together police agencies, government officials, insurance industry representatives and auto theft investigators.

"My life has been automobiles," says Haywood, a father of eight with wife Sheila.

Haywood, who was "born in the days of the Model A's," started out washing cars at a used-car lot in Vancouver, and put in time as a mechanic. He ended up owning a Ford dealership in Edmonton for 26 years.

Since he began Auto Theft Consulting Services in 1996, he has acquired a small Edmonton office jam-packed with files and binders of gatherings he has been to, from a meeting of the Edmonton Police Commission to an odometer rollback conference in Seattle.

He's developed contacts across North America -- a skill he says he owes to his car-selling days.

"I always told my salesmen, if you couldn't find common ground within three or four minutes, then there is something wrong. Networking is key."

One day he would like to see a national vehicle database to help stop organizations and thieves from transporting vehicles to other provinces to sell them.

Haywood is a man on a mission, says Rick Preston, executive director of Alberta Motor Vehicle Industry Council.

"Ken is a walking encyclopedia of the industry, without question. He's tackling an issue that's pervasive throughout the country and in North America -- stolen vehicles, odometer rollbacks and theft. He has not let go of these issues."

Haywood says the biggest misconception about auto theft is that it's a victimless crime.

He was a victim himself in 1993-94 when his dealership bought some late-model vehicles from the Quebec area that turned out to be stolen. He couldn't trace them because they had the serial numbers of written-off vehicles. He offered his customers alternative vehicles from his dealership, though he wasn't obligated to do so.

He dismisses the incident now with a wave of his hand, saying it's all in the past.

But the way he dealt with it is what gives him so much credibility today, says Marlene Viau, with the Ottawa-based National Committee to Reduce Auto Theft.

He's got a lot of integrity, Viau says.

She joined the fight to reduce auto theft after her brother, Sgt. Rick McDonald, was struck and killed by a stolen van in Ontario in 1999.

"Without Ken I just don't think I would have got this far," she says. "He's just so committed."

His work is a passion, admits Haywood, but it's also simply a way of life.

"I just keep on doing my thing," he says. "I don't golf, so I might as well do something."

More than 100 people are expected at the three-day symposium, which starts today.