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### A (Not So) Typical American Family

Kathy and Dave Cook are apple pie and ice cream middle class America. Kathy, an Arizonan, and Dave from Colorado, met in Lincoln, Ne. in 1985 while attending college. Couples meeting in college? A common occurrence. Married 14 years, the late 30-ish couple have one child, daughter Amber, 4. Surely some dictionary or encyclopedia must have a picture of the Cooks with the word normal beneath. Dave, a computer programmer, is now part owner of Spring Valley homes, a builder of energy efficient homes in Lincoln. Kathy is a kindergarten teacher at Helen Hyatt Elementary School. My vote is still for typical middle class America. What is so special about this couple? Well, Dave does pilot a Grand National Late Model stock car at several Nebraska and Iowa dirt tracks. Still, there are a reputed 10,000 of the species latemodelfastdriveth in the United States, so Dave's hobby is hardly strange. That Kathy shares in her husband's hobby is perfectly normal. Of course, maybe, just maybe, the fact that Kathy shares in Dave's hobby by driving an identically prepared GN Late Model might render them somewhat different. "I know of no other husband and wife team, both driving late models," laughed Cook.

So, how did this seeming normal couple end up racing cars on Nebraska dirt? Dave's grandfather built race cars for many drivers, so he has been around the sport his entire life-though when he was a youngster he didn't care for racing. "Too much noise," said Dave. When he was in high school Dave and 5 friends chipped in \$25 each to buy a '73 Firebird, stripped it, and rebuilt the engine in shop class, using parts provided by local auto parts stores in exchange for sponsorship. Racing at a local 1/5<sup>th</sup> mile asphalt oval, Dave won his first heat race. "The cars had a co-pilot," stated Cook. "Not like cruisers where the co-pilot controls either the gas or brake pedal, they were just along for the ride." Kathy's father was a mechanic by trade, and into racing motorcycles, so Kathy had some racing exposure as well.

Dave arrived in Lincoln to attend college the second semester of the 1984-85 school year. He met Kathy through a mutual friend shortly after his arrival. NO, their first date was not a storybook go to the races date. Of course, Nebraska race tracks don't race in the winter. Their SECOND date did end up at a race track though. According to Cook, "we were riding around looking for a race track, and headed east on Hwy 34. Twelve miles later, there was Eagle Raceway." Cruising into the grassy-read that muddy-parking lot, Dave proceeded to get his car stuck. Searching the parking area, Dave found a few wood planks. With Kathy at the wheel, the planks used for traction, and Dave pushing, they managed to get Dave's car back to the highway "a few feet at a time. It took hours. I should have realized what I was in for that afternoon," laughed Kathy.

That summer Dave returned to Colorado to work, and of course, to drive his bomber at the local track. A visiting Kathy became his co-pilot, her first time in a race car. The plot thickens.

Back to Lincoln again, and early the following spring Dave spotted an ad in a local paper for a "Frost Buster Enduro" at Nebraska International Raceway Park. Not being sure what an Enduro was did not stop Dave or his friends from signing up. Cheap junkers with engines not quite on their last gasp became Dave's preferred ride. Filling Lincoln dumpsters with torn out car interiors followed. As did welding scrap iron into roll cages late at night in the college parking lot, using a welder from the college maintenance shop. Dave and his friends became the Roush racing of Nebraska enduros, with a team of as many as six cars at some races. This class became the weekly Thunder Stock class at Nebraska International, and Kathy used Dave's car to race in powder puff events.

After graduating from college, the Cooks concentrated on their careers for several years. Still fans, they attended races at Sunset Speedway in Omaha. In 1992 the racing bug bit Dave again, and he bought a Camaro to run the Pro-Am division at Sunset and I-80 Speedway. The "Froggy 98" was a popular car at both tracks. In 1997 Dave moved up to the Grand National Late Model class and was rookie of the year at both Eagle Raceway and Sunset Speedway.

In 1998, with Dave firmly established in the GN ranks, the Pro-Am Camaro was once again rolled out, this time with Kathy behind the wheel. Kathy finished second in the Pro-Am rookie of the year standings at I-80 Speedway that year. In 1999 Kathy took the year off, with baby Amber on her way. Her break from racing did not last long. In 2000, Kathy not only got back in a race car, but like Dave, in a GN late model. They now drive identical GRT's. Both drivers are known for respecting other's equipment, and racing clean. Dave has won awards for sportsmanship, best appearing car, and most popular driver. He has 22 feature wins at seven different tracks. Kathy was I-80 Speedway GN rookie of the year in 2000, and was the first woman to ever win a race at NRP, taking a heat race in 2002.

A two car family has a totally different meaning for the Cooks. While race cars are built easier to repair than the family sedan, when it is just two people doing the work, the hours mount up. "We have friends help us at the track, but right now Kathy and I do the maintenance. We have a list, and she will change gears, lube, and wash the cars. I do any needed repairs and other maintenance. And weeks where nothing is tore up are greatly appreciated," laughed Dave.

Yes, they are often on the track at the same time. Occasionally they are racing for position. Earlier this year Dave edged Kathy at the checkered flag of an NRP heat race, costing Kathy a locked in spot for the evening's feature. "She's competitive," stated Dave. "She didn't like that I beat her, but she would have liked it less if I hadn't tried."

What is it like watching your spouse race a GN at the fast Nebraska tracks? “I am much more nervous when I am watching Kathy race, than when I am in my car,” spoke up Dave. “Not so much from a safety standpoint. More just wanting her to do good. When we are in a race together, if Kathy is behind me, and a caution occurs behind me, I am concerned until I can see everything is OK.” According to Kathy, “Only one time did I ever fear for Dave’s safety. He was hit from behind at I-80 Speedway, and the hit badly sprained his wrist. Somehow, the hit drove a support bar through his fuel cell. He wasn’t getting out of the car because of his wrist, and fuel was leaking everywhere. I was yelling for the safety crew to check him out, and no one was.” Other than the sore wrist and ruined fuel cell, everything turned out OK in that wreck. Kathy has been less fortunate in several accidents. “Which one do you want to hear about, her dramatic wreck, or her serious one?” asked Dave. In 2002, Kathy was turned around by another car, smacked the back stretch wall at NRP, and rolled over. A nasty looking wreck, but Kathy suffered only a bruise, and that came from crawling out of the car. In 2003, a seemingly innocent looking wreck at NRP’s season ending Cornhusker Classic was not so innocent at all. Exiting a corner in a heat race, another car hit Kathy’s left front wheel. There was no damage to the car, but the impact snapped the steering wheel, shattering Kathy’s wrist. For a time it appeared she might not be ready to race at the start of the 2004 season, but a winter of surgery and rehab worked wonders, and Kathy was on hand for the mid-April opening of the Nebraska racing season.

With her injury happening on a Saturday night, Kathy was back in school on Monday. Of course her colleagues guessed the injury was directly related to the race car, and asked if her racing days were over. “They thought I was nuts wanting to go back, but I never gave any thought to quitting,” stated Kathy.

So what about Kathy, the kindergarten teacher?? Does she use the racing in her teaching? “Every year I put up a collage, pictures of my family and our activities, so of course the car is included,” said Kathy. “Some parents think I am joking, and of course some of the boys don’t believe I drive a race car. It was more of a novelty when I just raced powder puff, but I do have parents, students, and colleagues who attend races.”

“I can also use racing safety when talking about safety on the playground, on the streets, and buckling up seat belts,” stated Kathy. “It does seem like the race car makes it easier for the boys to bond with me. They open up more. And in my class, it is not just boys who play with trucks and girls who play with dolls. It doesn’t matter. You can set whatever goals you want, and have fun achieving them.”

A typical American family? Hardly. They are great role models both on and off the track. Normal? Nope, how about singularly uncommon?

Sidebar: [WWW.DirtDrivers.com](http://WWW.DirtDrivers.com)

When Dave and Kathy Cook attended races as fans, Dave often quizzed Kathy about drivers and their feats. The pair felt that a program with driver's profiles would be a welcome addition to the Midwest racing scene. Costs were prohibitive, but as the internet spread like wildfire, Dave, along with associate Nate Harris, developed an even better idea, what was to become dirtdrivers.com. The website contains scores of driver profiles, but much, much more. There is a chat room, and race results and upcoming events from various tracks are listed. The site is unique for its message boards. "Boards on most racing sites are by class," said Dave. "We decided to do our boards by tracks." Though both have full time jobs, in addition to preparing and racing two late models, the Cooks do moderate every message posted to the message boards. "Arguments can start quickly on a racing forum," noted Dave. While they spend "dozens and dozens" of hours moderating and updating the site, the Cooks feel it is time well spent, as the site now has 8,000 registered users and receives over 3 million hits each month.