

Shifting Gears

Rich Man's Jets and Family Sedans: The Creative Crayons of Earl Lucas

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By Roger Witherspoon

When July 1 rolled around and the sales figures for the first half of the year began rolling in, it was obvious that Ford and Earl Lucas were having a good year.

Sales of the Taurus, the completely redesigned, full sized, family sedan had more than doubled over the first half of 2009 and tripled over the previous June to a respectable 36,000 units. That meant money for Ford, which earned record profits in the first half of the year, and internal recognition for Lucas, who had risen through the ranks to be the Taurus' chief designer.

That recognition – inside Ford and in the showrooms – meant a lot to a kid from Dallas who grew up toting a sketch pad around. His parents encouraged his fledgling art talent, he said, and so did adults in church and teachers in school.

“Every place I went,” he recalled, “folks kept telling me ‘you should keep that up. You should go with it.’ At every major moment, there was someone there to steer me in the right direction. My middle school did not have a great arts program, but I had a great art teacher who steered me to the Arts Magnet.”

Lucas graduated from the Arts Magnet with a scholarship from Ford, and entered the College for

Creative Studies in Detroit, a primary training ground for automotive designers, where he was classmates with Ralph Gilles, now the vice president for design at Chrysler. Many of the Black students made it through the program with the assistance of pioneer in the car industry, Sam Meyers.

“He used to work at Ford for 25 years,” said Lucas, “and he decided to visit the campus of CCS and introduce himself to the admissions department and asked about minority students.

“He took all of us into his basement and gave us supplies which we couldn’t afford, and he would teach us. You could bring him a sketch and he wasn’t always nice about it, but he would work with you and teach you what to really do. I learned so much from him about how to be prepared and how to excel in this environment.”

Upon graduating in 1994, Lucas took his pencils to Lear Jets in Texas for two years, working on interior design. From there, he went to Reese Design, a specialty jet design shop “and what a wonderful job that was” he said. “They designed aircraft interiors for the jets of the Sultan of Brunei. I flew all over the country to see that design through. Money was no object, so if I wanted to propose platinum silverware, we would do it.

“It’s a different world designing aircraft interiors for the world’s richest man to designing for a car company known as a value brand.”



But Lucas really wanted to be a car designer and, in 1999, joined Ford, working as the senior interior designer for the 2000 Lincoln Navigator and Ford Expedition., and then for the 2003 F-150 pickup truck. Ford’s F-series trucks, were, and are, the company’s largest selling vehicle. For the first half of 2010, the F-series trucks sold 240,345 units – more than half of all heavy duty trucks sold in America and the best selling vehicle of any type on the road.

From there, Lucas moved on to the interiors of the Ford Edge and its Lincoln counterpart, the MKX, as well as the distinctive Ford Flex SUV (

<http://rwshiftinggears.wordpress.com/2009/10/07/09-ford-flex/>). “The Flex is structured and purposeful,” he said, “and has a different type of aesthetic. But it’s a clean, utilitarian shape. For the interior we wanted a quiet horizon. When you stepped inside there is calmness, a safe haven.”

The work on the Flex earned him a promotion to design manager for the exterior of the new Taurus. The boxy Flex SUV and the sleek Taurus sedan had little in common. “You take a different approach when you design the Flex and when you design the Taurus,” he explained. “The Flex was practical. It was there when I need to take the kids to soccer practice.

“The new Taurus was to be a ‘Me’ sedan – something you look good in if you have the kids or don’t have any kids. It needed expressive styling that comes from thinking of people going out to have a good time, rather than just hauling kids and stuff around. My wife won’t let me go too fast in it, but with a 365 horsepower engine, it’s as fast as a Mustang GT.”

It’s an easy comparison for him to make. At home, he tools around in a Mustang, but uses the Taurus when out with his wife and two children. But he chose to drive the Taurus to a reunion of his class of auto designers at CCS.

“I was feeling really good when I got there,” he recalled, laughing. “I’m a designer at Ford and I feel great. I’m in my new Taurus and when I walk on campus people are going to recognize me.

“Then Ralph shows up in the all new Ram truck, and he is hauling his black Viper. So I realized I’ve got a little ways to go.”

