

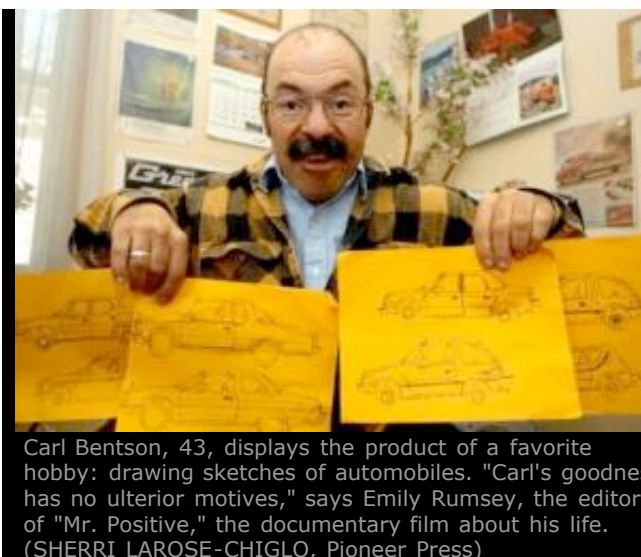
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The world according to Carl

A documentary film tells the story of St. Paul resident Carl Bentson and his generous heart.

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Carl Bentson, 43, displays the product of a favorite hobby: drawing sketches of automobiles. "Carl's goodness has no ulterior motives," says Emily Rumsey, the editor of "Mr. Positive," the documentary film about his life. (SHERRI LAROSE-CHIGLO, Pioneer Press)

Perhaps you've seen Carl. He's around town on the three-wheel bicycle festooned with flags, mirrors, reflectors, a canopy, a windshield off a Harley-Davidson and lights. A guy who pedals 9,000 miles a year ought to have lights.

Carl Bentson from the West End of St. Paul has a lot of things, if you count all the friends who cherish the quiet, cheerful school custodian, and now he has a 30-minute documentary film, appropriately called "Mr. Positive," inspired by his extraordinary life.

Carl, 43, knows things. He knows so many, many things by heart: when the big old automobile plants folded; which Cadillac had the largest fins; how far it is to Madison, Wis. ("252 miles. You can drive it."); and just where Legoland is at the Mall of America.

His good friend and mentor, physician and author Tim Rumsey, has called Carl a savant, with a special genius for memory and spatial orientation. At the same time, his verbal IQ is low, attributed to something called Cornelia de Lange syndrome. Carl does not drive a car, but he works every day. Carl is not married, but he owns his own home, manages his own money and makes his own meals. He hates dandelions but likes to dress up, draw pictures of cars and go to the Ordway, air shows, auto shows and Duluth. Above all, he likes people.

"Carl's goodness has no ulterior motives," says Emily Rumsey, Tim Rumsey's daughter and the editor of "Mr. Positive."

"He absolutely loves people. He has no ego."

The documentary she worked on with others in her family was at least seven years in the making and will premiere at 7 and 8 p.m. Saturday at the West Seventh Community Center, 265 Oneida St. The film was produced by St. Paul's "Media Mike" Hazard at his Center for International Education. Hazard has done other documentaries on local icons such as Tiger Jack Rosenbloom and U.S. Sen. Eugene McCarthy.

That's a long way from Carl's less-than-auspicious start in life. He was given up by his rural Minnesota parents and spent his first four years in a state hospital. When the hospital closed, Carl was fortunate to become one of the 162 foster children of Vashti Risdall, one of Ramsey County's premier foster mothers.

Vashti died in 2003 at the age of 100, but she was interviewed in the documentary at length years earlier, talking about the very special son who, even after he was on his own, would push his snow blower two miles to her house.

"When Vashti was very old, she asked me if I could take over and watch Carl," says Karen Koepp, a former neighbor who still lives on the West End. "It has gone way beyond taking care of. He is very important in my life. He is family. He calls my mother his mother."

"I'll go to Mama's for Thanksgiving,"

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Carl says, "That's out in Waverly. Hubert Humphrey was from Waverly."

Carl and Karen, who does not have children, spend a lot of



Carl Bentson is pictured with his three-wheel bicycle outside his home on St. Clair Avenue on St. Paul's West End. (SHERRI LAROSE-CHIGLO, Pioneer Press)

time together going to plays, art galleries, riding trains and going to restaurants. He likes to wear a really quality suit that Karen had tailored for him from one of her late father's suits.

Carl is a custodian at Bridgeview School, where he went to school as a child. When I first wrote about him in 1999, his supervisors said he was an exceptional employee and so enthusiastic about picking up trash and refuse that he often went off school grounds after it and had to be reminded that there was nothing in his job that required him to clean up the surrounding neighborhood.

In the documentary, neighbors say no leaf, dandelion or longish blade of grass in anyone's yard is safe when Carl is around and that he can be counted on to keep the sidewalks clear with any one of his three husky snow blowers.

Carl is a colorful fixture of the West Seventh Street-Fort Road parade, riding his distinctive bike and waving cheerfully as bystanders call his name.

His small home on St. Clair Avenue near West Seventh is filled with books and magazines, colorful paper and fabric flowers and accurately detailed pencil drawings of Carl's favorite

autos. His table is formally set for company, and he changes his decorations, inside and out, with the seasons. Thanksgiving's coming up, he says, then Christmas.

"People often underestimate what he can do," says Karen, "and that is unfortunate because doctors sometimes don't share with him information they should, information that he can handle."

At the same time, Carl's innocence makes him vulnerable because he assumes everyone is a friend. Some acquaintances have used Carl in financial deals that went sour. Karen has managed to iron those out.

Through the years, he's ridden his bike to Red Wing, Taylors Falls and Forest Lake, as many as 9,000 miles a year. He was knocked off his bike and lost it, however, to a gang of youths at Dale and University one year. He doesn't range so far afield these days, Karen says. He stays closer to home or takes the bus.

In the documentary, Carl is at one of his favorite haunts - Porky's on University Avenue for the weekly car show. The beat cop, Steve Japps, puts his cap on Carl and lets him direct traffic into and out of the lot.

Carl directs them out, saying to each one, "Put your belts on! Please."

This documentary will be available for sale and also will be offered to the independent film channels on television, Emily Rumsey and Media Mike say.

"Carl is important to me," says Mike. "He takes time to smell the roses and to thank people. He has made me feel like I want to be a better citizen and care about my neighbors.

"He's a gift."

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