

Life throws us many curveballs. Some we can manage. Some are tougher for us to deal with. The philosophers say it's how we handle ourselves through life's trials and tribulations that end up defining who we are. It's how we discover ourselves. Of all of life's challenges, nothing can prepare someone for the loss of one's father.

At first glance, Evan Yankovich is a fairly unassuming guy. Behind black rim glasses and a grease-stained uniform, he's soft-spoken but overwhelmingly friendly. And at only 26, he has assumed more responsibility than most his age. Three years ago Evan was propelled to assume partial ownership (his mother Rose Yankovich is co-owner) – and leadership – of his family and the family business as his father, Joseph, succumbed to the ravages of cancer.

"He was a workaholic, as most parents are," remembers Evan Yankovich, as he sits in the office his father used to inhabit. "It was great when he finally owned the business, because I got to work with him every day."

Joseph Yankovich was your run-of-the-mill hardworking car enthusiast. A dedicated Snap-On dealer for 22 years, he watched as the industry he dedicated half of his life to was changing, and he didn't like it. So in 2004, instead of retiring, he made an offer to buy the shop from former Harbor Brake owner Wayne Lebsack, who had operated the brake shop for decades.

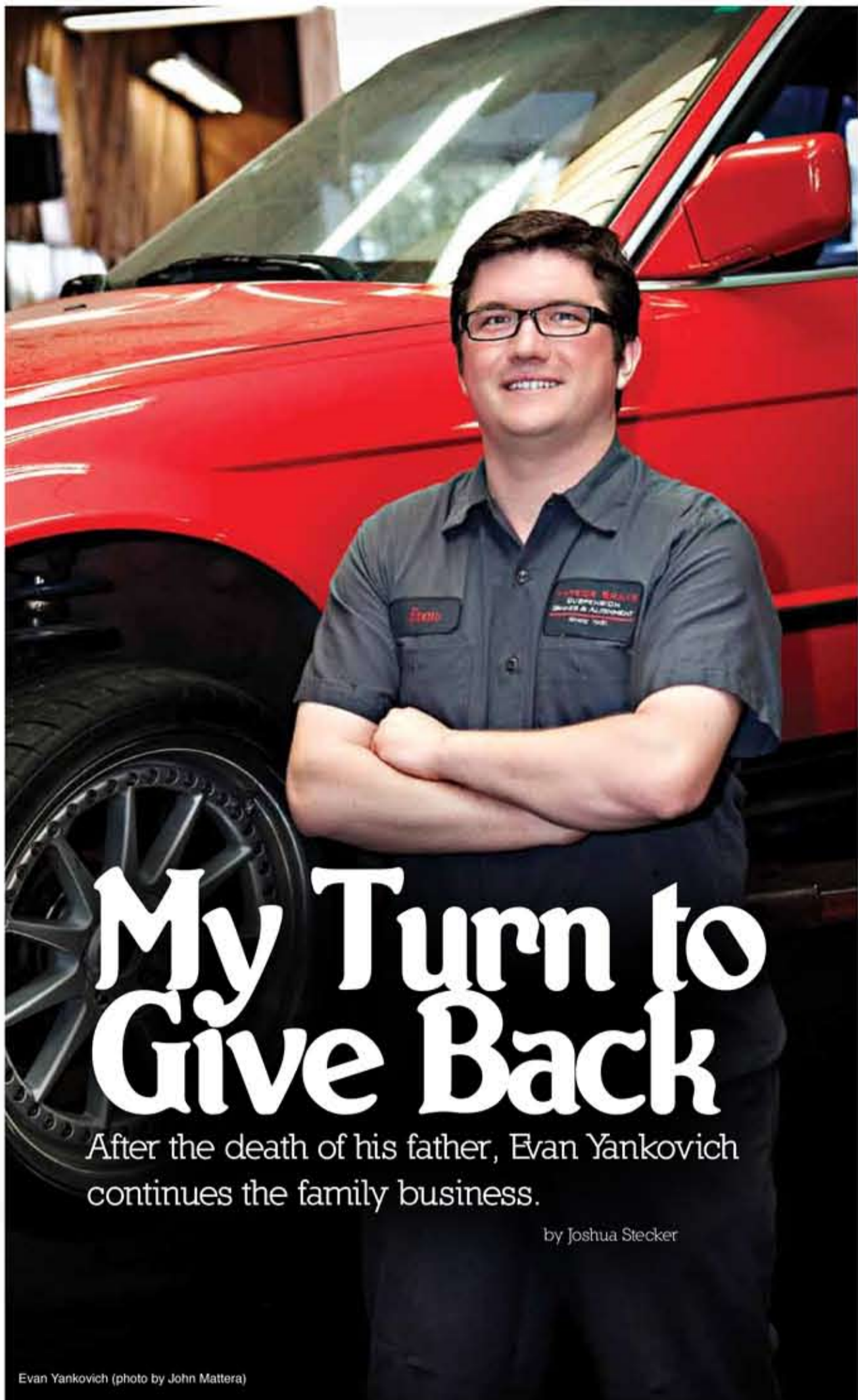
"He met Wayne through a friend," says Evan, "Wayne knew my dad was a good, honest guy. So he was comfortable selling the business to him."

In the early days of owning the business Evan would help his father with the paperwork and office duties. Only 21-years-old when the family took over the shop, Evan's job was to try and introduce the 70-plus year old shop to the digital age. "My dad loved to get his hands dirty with the cars, he didn't much like dealing with the paperwork," he says. "Funny thing is, even though I converted all the office work to computers, my dad still kept a separate set of hardcopy books. He didn't trust computers all that much."

Evan's sister, Erika Yankovich remembers the long hours Evan put in to bring the shop up to date. "He converted Harbor Brake from handwritten everything, to computer everything, [including] invoices, paychecks [and] a shop program," says Erika. "I always pictured Evan in some computer programming or IT job because he works so well with them. I guess he sort of combined the two (computer knowledge and automotive knowledge) in our dad's shop, computerizing everything from being handwritten."

A Miraleste High School graduate, Joseph had a strong network of family and friends in San Pedro. And in typical San Pedro fashion, much of the shop's clientele consisted of that same group of people. "My dad was such a great guy with our customers," remembers Evan, a Peninsula High School graduate himself. "If a customer was upset with something, he'd lose sleep over it."

Not long after acquiring the shop, Joseph fell ill. He was diagnosed with small cell type-B non-Hodgkin Lymphoma, which at first the family was told was treatable. "When we first



My Turn to Give Back

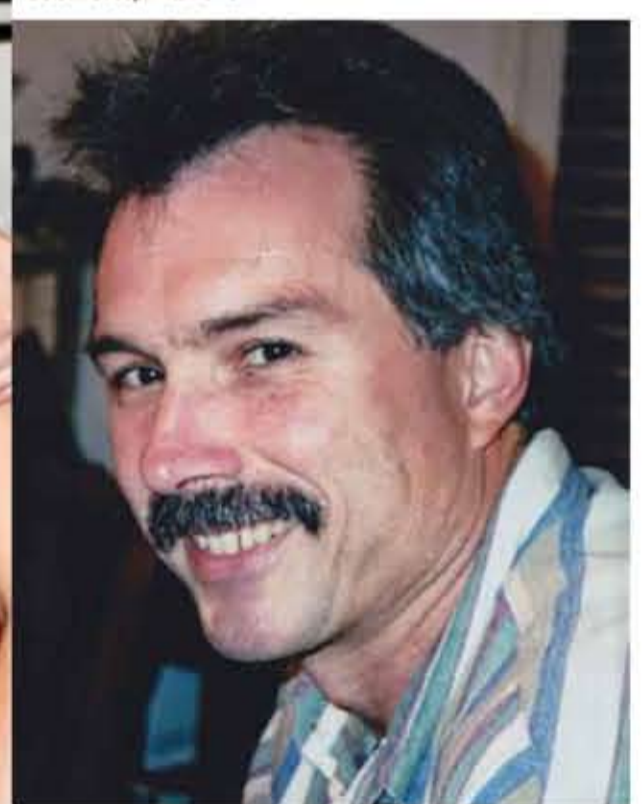
After the death of his father, Evan Yankovich continues the family business.

by Joshua Stecker

Evan Yankovich (photo by John Mattera)



Evan with his mom Rose (left) and sister, Erika. Below: Joseph Yankovich.



discovered Joe was sick the doctors felt he had a good chance of surviving the cancer," says his mother, Rose. "He had his chemo treatments and fortunately, was able to continue working. About a year into his treatments everything changed. The chemo stopped working and we received the worst possible news, the cancer was terminal. As Joe's health deteriorated Evan basically stepped into his dad's shoes. No one asked or told him – he just did it. Evan would come home at night and discuss the events of the day with Joe. It was quite touching, really pulled at the heartstrings."

"I knew it was bad right from the beginning," says Evan. "I forced my dad to stay at home. I took over from there. I tried to take on as much responsibility as I could. My father gave so much to my family, it was my turn to give back."

The passing of the torch was tremendously difficult. As his father lay at home under hospice care, the cruelty of cancer slowly taking him away from the people that loved him most, Evan still charged on. He became owner, manager, employee, bookkeeper and customer service guy all at once.

"What else could I do?," he asks rhetorically. "You got to take care of business. Life isn't always happy or fair, but you do what you gotta do."

Joseph Yankovich died in April 2007, at home with his family by his side.

Picking up the pieces was hard, but the Yankovich family moved on the best they could. "I honestly don't think there are

too many young adults out there that would be able to do what Evan did," says Rose. "At the age of 23 he took over running the business. Not just answering the phones and making appointments, he did everything. He quickly found out all the responsibilities involved in owning your own business. I would go in to check on things, but soon realized it wasn't necessary. As tough as it was for him I also think it was a blessing. It gave him a place to go both physically and mentally during his dad's illness, kind of an escape. It really helps to keep your mind busy when going through that kind of situation."

Being a business owner on Pacific Ave. has its challenges. Evan spends money out of his pocket cleaning up trash and graffiti on his building. "The last five years the area has come around a lot for the better," he says. "But it's definitely not where it should or could be." Knowing this to be the case, Evan is inspired to do what he can to create a positive change in San Pedro. "I like to give back to my community," he says.

Evan notes that having a family-owned business in San Pedro has its privileges. He knows practically every business owner in the shop's vicinity and they help each other out, bartering services and sharing customer recommendations. He believes this camaraderie is also infused in his customers, many of whom are third and fourth generation, which is a testament to the business. In addition to their quality brake and alignment services, Harbor Brake offers a free oil change if you're a new resident of San Pedro.

There is a transparency within the business that Evan cultivates. Even though he'll admit not all the quotes he gives are the cheapest, he's the first one to tell you he would never offer an unnecessary service to a customer. "I like to give a good, honest quote," he says.

Incredibly, the shop isn't the only thing on Evan's plate. Because he never completed college traditionally due to his father's illness, he currently attends night school at Cal State Long Beach working on a business administration and economics degree. He's also vice president of the San Pedro Lions Club. "Nearly everyone in the club is twice my age," laughs Evan. He balances all of this while also trying to maintain the social life of a 20-something.

"Evan does what Evan wants," explains Rose. "Right now he wants to run this business. At one point he admitted to me that it was important for him to continue on with the business both for his dad and myself. I think he feels like he needs to protect me. Many times I've told him it's okay if he wants to move on. I don't want him to feel like he has to follow in his dad's footsteps. I want him to do whatever is going to make him happy."

With three years of healing behind him, Evan is aware that he's had to grow up quicker than most. "I like being in charge," he says with a chuckle. "I like managing my own business." **spt**

Harbor Brake is located at 217 S. Pacific Ave. For more information, call (310) 832-3985