

# Automotive News

STILL STANDING: THE STATE OF BLACK DEALERSHIPS IN AMERICA

## 'Well, how did you get here?' She grew up in the business

**Arlena Sawyers**

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CENTERVILLE, Ohio -- In an industry in which dealer principals typically are white and male, the dealer principal at Bob Ross Buick-GMC and Mercedes-Benz is neither.

Jenell Ross, 41, is one of a handful of black women who own and operate dealerships in the United States.

What's more, Ross is the only black woman in the country who is a second-generation dealer principal, according to the National Association of Minority Automobile Dealers. She also is vice chairman of the American International Automobile Dealers Association and is in line to become its chairman in 2013.

Ross became her company's vice president and dealer principal in 1997 when her father, Robert Ross Sr., died. She operated the family-owned business with her mother, Norma, who was president and CEO, until Norma Ross died last year.

Jenell Ross now manages the business with her brother, Robert Jr., vice president in charge of fixed operations. The family has been awarded a Fiat franchise that is to be operational by year end. The Mercedes-Benz store is being renovated to comply with Mercedes' Autohaus dealership-improvement program. The renovation is to be completed by the beginning of September.

Asked how she handles business situations in which she is the lone minority woman, Ross chuckles and smiles.

"I have fun with it," she says. "A lot of people who didn't know my parents or our history ask, "Well, how did you get here?"

"For the first two years after my father passed I felt like I needed to wear something that explains our story: "This is how I got here and as a dealer I'm trying to do what you're doing."



Jenell Ross, in front at left, her brother, father and mother all have worked in the family business.

Ross, who walks through the Buick-GMC dealership showroom with a purposeful stride, was a toddler when her father became a dealer.

Her parents were natives of Richmond, Ind., who moved to Dayton, Ohio. In 1962, Bob Ross sold cars at Shannon Buick in Dayton; Norma Ross was an elementary school teacher and a curriculum consultant for the Dayton Public Schools.

Bob Ross, smitten by the auto industry, took part in General Motors' first minority dealer training class in 1972. In 1974, he acquired his first store, Vivian Buick-Opel-International Harvester Trucks, in Richmond and moved the family back to his hometown.

It was the same store -- with the same owner -- at which he had worked as a teenager washing and moving vehicles, Jenell Ross says.

Bob Ross sold the Richmond dealership in 1979 when he acquired what was then Davis Buick and Mercedes-Benz of Centerville in suburban Dayton, under one roof at the time.

That made him the first black Mercedes-Benz dealer in the United States, according to Mercedes-Benz USA. In 1982 he added GMC and in 1984 built a separate showroom for Mercedes-Benz. He added a separate fixed

operations department for the luxury brand in 1989.

The family still operates the Buick-GMC and Mercedes-Benz stores but bought and sold other dealerships in suburban Dayton over the years. It owned a Chevrolet dealership in Troy, Ohio, from 1988 to 1991. Its Centerville location sold Volkswagens from 1993 to 1996 and Hummers from 2002 to 2008.

Norma Ross always helped with the stores' advertising and community affairs and took over the business when her husband died.

Jenell Ross says she always liked being at the family's dealerships, often going to the Buick-GMC and Mercedes store after school to do her homework.

Summers during high school and college were spent working at one of the dealerships, mostly in the accounting department. Her school projects and term papers were virtually always about the auto business.



Ross hugs Rita Fannon, who has worked at the Centerville, Ohio, store for 57 years, longer than the Ross family has owned it.

*Photo credit: NICK DAGGY*

In college she wrote a paper about black dealers and the problems they had getting capital for their stores.

"They were the same issues dealers have today with reserves and access to capital," she says.

Ross received a bachelor's degree in sociology from Emory University in Atlanta. She worked as the dealerships' customer relations manager until her father died. Stepping into the dealer principal role, she completed the GM Dealer Management Development Program and the National Automobile Dealers Association Dealer Candidate Academy.

Among her fondest childhood memories, Ross says, is coming home from school on Fridays often to find the family's bags packed for weekend trips to Detroit.

For her, those weekend getaways were minivacations. But for her father, they were informal 20 group meetings with black dealers who had stores in Detroit.

Ross says her father and his dealer friends spent untold hours studying and exchanging ideas about ways to operate their businesses more efficiently, more profitably.

"They would have papers spread out all over the floor strategizing and working together," she recalls.

"The other kids would say they went to the park over the weekend; we went to Detroit."



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*Photo credit: NICK DAGGY*

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