

40 UNDER 40 | In the Fast Lane with RENEE DUPUIS | Connecticut ABROAD **cptv**

CONNECTICUT

connecticutmag.com

MAGAZINE

Master chocolatier
Fritz Knipschildt
raises the (candy) bar

Sweet success

Candymakers, renowned restaurateurs, colorful quilters, fast-growing tech companies—we celebrate 10 of Connecticut's best success stories.

FEBRUARY 2014 \$3.95



PLT 1

#266283339# CPTV 3
CAR-RT LOT#R-008

MRS DIANE GEDEON MARTIN
583 GOODALE HILL RD
CLASTONBURY CT 06033-4022



Ever since she was a little girl, Renee Dupuis has dreamed of driving with the big boys of NASCAR in ...

THE FAST LANE

by Nikita Lalwani

The first time I meet Renee Dupuis, she's driving a black Buick—a Carbon Black Metallic 2011 Buick Enclave, to be precise. It's the sort of SUV you'd expect a mom to drive to soccer practice—nothing fast, nothing sexy. Inside her perfectly normal car, Renee seems like a perfectly normal driver. She's following road signs, stopping when the lights are red and accelerating, very gently, when they turn green. She seems bored. She drives with one hand, the other fiddling with the radio knobs or holding her cell phone or drumming on her right knee.

Renee is not, in fact, a perfectly normal

driver. You wouldn't know unless you happen to catch her daydreaming, her dark blue eyes glazing, the arrow on the speedometer climbing steadily rightward, hitting 30 mph, then 40... 50... 65... This is Renee in her element, speeding smoothly along the curvy back roads of Glastonbury, the river town where she has spent her life. When there are no other cars on the road, she could coast like this forever (or at least until the next stop sign). That's why she hates big cities: too many drivers, too much traffic and too much time stuck behind people who drive too frickin' slow.

Renee was just not built to drive a boring black Buick on the back roads of Glastonbury or anywhere else. But the NASCAR racing season starts in late March, which means her two race cars are hibernating in her garage-cum-workshop, one taken apart so thoroughly that only the skeleton of its frame remains until she rebuilds it in the spring. She is stuck with the Buick for the long winter, so she makes do with a few moments of reverie, those times when she allows herself to accelerate, imagining that she's crossing the finish line on a banked track to jubilant cheers.

Now 41, she has raced cars for almost as long as she's been alive. When she was only a year old, her father placed a tiny electric ladybug-shaped car under the family's Christmas tree. A few moments later, he heard a crash and found Renee covered in tinsel and ornaments: She'd driven the ladybug straight into the tree. By 4, she had graduated from her toy bug to a miniature blue-and-gray race car, competing in the Quarter Midget racing division for kids up to age 15, and accumulating enough trophies to line a wall of her garage.

After graduating from UConn, Renee began focusing on her racing career full-time, competing on the NASCAR Whelan Modified Tour and, during a regular season, running anywhere from five to 14 races on tracks on the East Coast. In 1999, she became the first woman to win a NASCAR race at the now-defunct Riverside Park Speedway in Agawam, Mass. Her remarkable victory was chronicled the following year in two sports exhibits at The Women's Museum, a Smithsonian affiliate in Dallas. That was her favorite race; she keeps a fragment of the Riverside track in a glass case on the left wall of her garage, along with tickets, receipts and other memorabilia of the day.

As we round the curves en route to Renee's garage, I joke that she must have had an easy time passing her road test. She laughs sheepishly and offers a surprising confession: She actually came *this* close to failing. The driving instructor who administered her test in Wethersfield said she was cutting her left turns too sharply—the sort of move that speeds you up on the track but can be dangerous on the road. “Another sharp left and you’ll fail,” her proctor warned. At that point, Renee had been driving on back roads with her dad for nearly four years and in race cars for almost 12.

Renee still cuts her lefts a little too sharply; she can't help it. She was built to race. “It gets in your blood,” she says, “and you just can't get away from it.”

Renee's garage smells of gasoline, metal, must, horses and hay, the last two because the garage is attached to a stable of seven horses. (General Granite, alias “Gnat,” a stately bay Hanoverian, is a favorite.) The structure is nestled at the bottom of the driveway, part of the family-owned farm operated by Renee's parents, David and Kathe. They named



it Race Hill Farm, appropriate because despite the horses and the occasional llama, the heart of the farm has long been Renee's garage, her home sixty hours a week during the season.

Renee shares the racing gene with her father, who gave up competing at Connecticut's Stafford Motor Speedway to support her career, and her brother, Jason, who now serves as her crew chief. They feature prominently in the photos that line the garage walls; her favorite is a faded one in the right corner, taken at the old family gas station—she's about 6, lanky and blonde, perched on the trunk of her father's race car in shorts and a striped tank top. She's smiling up at David, who's leaning on the car beside her, hands clasped across his waist, head tilted toward his daughter. In the foreground is Renee's own tiny pink race car, less than one-quarter the size of her father's behemoth. Both cars bear the same number: 90.

In photos and outside of them, Renee is one of the guys. She's most comfortable in jeans, a gray sweatshirt and, when it's cold, a black-and-blue windbreaker. She's pretty, with deep-set blue eyes and a dimpled smile, but she doesn't flaunt it. Tonight, she's tied her dirty blonde hair in a ponytail and under a men's sports cap. She never wears a dress, and she hates heels (“I'd rather be in my racing shoes,” she says). It's no surprise that most of Renee's friends are men. She feels more comfortable around them.

Renee likes to say she was born without the gene that makes you want children, but it seems to me she already has two, and they sit in the center of the garage, pampered and well-groomed. One has been stripped to its chassis and covered with a beige sheet, but the car that bears her father's number is in the open—palatinate blue with a solid red frame,

and covered with dozens of corporate stickers—Mobil, Coors Light, Mechanix Wear. Her cars are sleek, light and fast, weighing about half as much as a typical street car and clocking up to 160 mph.

Renee knows everything about her cars—how to change a tire, how to adjust the shocks and springs, how to dismantle the rear with a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch wrench. This wasn't always the case. One night in high school, she was watching Jason fix up his car in the garage when he asked for her help. She balked. He looked at her in disbelief, saying “Just because you're a girl doesn't mean you can't learn how to work with cars.” And from then on, she did. She likes to say that even though she has a crew of six or seven guys who are trained engineers, she has never asked them to do anything she could do herself.

Seeing Renee in charge rubs some men the wrong way. When she talks about these guys—like a mechanic she hired in 2010—she grimaces. She remembers one night in her garage, watching him reconfigure the car's rear hub assembly. She saw that he'd forgotten to screw one of the parts tightly in place, but when she confronted him, he was belligerent, yelling that he'd done nothing wrong. “I could've told him anything, nice as pie, and there would've been resistance just because I'm not a guy,” she says. “As soon as Jason stepped in and told him he was wrong, he was okay with that.”

“It's my frickin' ass in that race car, my safety on the line,” she says, her voice rising over the hum of the radiator. “If I want to double-check someone's work because I'm concerned for my own safety, you bet I'll do that. Whether I'm right or I'm wrong, you've gotta give me some respect. I don't care how tough it is on a guy's ego.”

Renee at the wheel of the No. 59 Unus Insurance Group Ed Bannet Prop. Chevrolet during a race in Winchester, N.H. (right) Renee's fans are more than just little girls who look to her for inspiration.



PHOTO BY B. L. FOR THE TV SHOWS 'RACEWORLD'



WARREN MCCOLLETER/GETTY IMAGES FOR NASCAR

Renee has said men can be assholes. If the history of female drivers is any indication, she may have a point.

In 1914, *Motor* magazine sponsored an essay contest to answer the question: "Do Women Make Good Drivers?" In response, one S.P. Foster, of Elmer, New Jersey, wrote that women were no fitter to operate automobiles than they were to pilot ships or command armies. At least it wasn't their fault. "They were born that way," he concluded. Some women thought so, too. *Motor* columnist Margaret R. Burlingame wrote in 1913 that the female mind was not "trained to quick action," unable to deal with speed or to make snap decisions to avoid a crash.

Needless to say, female race car drivers were rare. The best-known woman speedster of the early 1900s was the wealthy Joan Newton Cunco of Long Island. Driving a gasoline-powered touring car, Cunco won multiple races between 1905 and 1909 and broke several speed records. But when the American Automobile Association banned women from competing, effectively ending her career, she did nothing. "Would that I could cultivate some suffragette tendencies and fight for my rights," she said. "But I can't, having instead always tried to keep the woman's end in automobiling sweet, clean, and refined."

Fast-forward a century. Women can drive, vote and compete in the Indy 500. There has been a slew of successful female racers—Janet Guthrie, Shawna Robinson, Danica Patrick—though it's troubling that a quick Google search for "female race car drivers" turns up results like "The Top 15 Hottest Female Race Car Drivers." Women seem to inhabit a sort of liminal space on the track, sometimes legitimate competitors but more often sex symbols—or cute props.

In the 1960s cartoon "Wacky Races," in which drivers competed to become the World's Wackiest Racer, the lone female participant, Penelope Pitstop, was a Southern belle who drove a fancy pink convertible (the Compact Pussycat) that doubled as a rolling beauty parlor. She would stop during races to primp her hair or touch up mascara, but the men, being gallant, usually gave her the right of way.

Once, Renee was qualifying for a race at Thompson International Speedway, finishing up two solo laps against the clock that would determine her starting spot. When she stepped out of her car, she saw that she was ranked first. The next competitor, an alpha male, turned to his crew chief and said, "If I don't beat her score, you can take the seat out of my car." Two laps later, he was seatless—and pissed.

"This sort of stuff happens all the time," she says. "The attitude really gets to me."

The funny thing about speed in a race car is that you don't feel it when you're traveling around the track. Race cars are built without speedometers; the only speed that matters is how fast you get to the finish line. You feel how fast you've been going only when you come to a sudden stop, usually an accident, with massive inertia propelling you forward.

Every driver has an accident story, and Renee's is from 2001, at the Stafford Motor Speedway. She'd just come off a turn when the car nearest her drifted to the right, tires colliding with Renee's and launching her car straight into the air. Seconds later, it landed on its nose at the base of the track wall, teetering for a moment before falling atop another vehicle. The next thing Renee remembers is that she was barely conscious, trying to escape from a crushed car that was on fire—flames dancing around the wheels and smoke billowing into the clear April sky.

She broke nearly every bone in her left foot and lost significant amounts of tissue in her left knee and femur, but after four surgeries and months of recovery, she headed straight back to the track.

Renee appears to belong to that strange breed of person who is not afraid of anything. You can't be afraid of dying if you want to be a race car driver, she says, just as you can't be afraid of water if you want to be a swimmer. Almost every track has seen death, some more than others. Renee has witnessed two racers die firsthand, both in Thompson. First in August 2004, when Tom Baldwin's car crashed into a concrete block in the infield; the second in August 2007, when John Blewett III's car spun several times and crashed into another. Renee continued to race.

If I had to guess, though, I'd say there is something Renee fears, something like the absence of speed. She is happy only when she is moving, striving, achieving—when she's setting and exceeding what once seemed like impossible goals. What motivates her is simpler than a desire to prove herself in a man's world, although that's part of it—it's a desire to become the best possible version of herself. It explains why she's so uncomfortable in the off-season, so unwilling to take time off, and why this past winter instead of relaxing she took up dressage and formulated more rigorous workouts.

It also may explain why Renee has been unhappy at her other job at the Boilermakers Northeast Area apprenticeship program in East Hartford. She has been working there since high school, but has remained a sort of glorified secretary. It's a field, like racing, dominated by men. So for now, she's stuck where she is.

At 41 (though she looks 30), Renee would be washed up if she were a basketball player or an Olympic swimmer. Race car drivers last a long time. Still, she'll have to retire within ten years. This is a sobering thought, but not one to which she gives much attention. She'll probably stick around the racing world in some form, but she's not making plans just yet. She'll keep on moving until she gets there. ■