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## Jenkins Making Quiet But Important Mark in NASCAR



Vermont Bill Jenkins is in his first year as a team owner on the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series, fielding the #26 Ford for driver David Stremme. Jenkins is an intensely private man, and strives to shift any focus on himself to members of his team, namely Stremme and crew chief Frankie Stoddard, a North Haverhill, N.H., native raised in the pits at Barre's Thunder Road as a crewman for late legend Stub Fadden.

Try as he might, Jenkins does a respectable job staying out of the headlines, but it's becoming time to give credit where it's due.

After winning at Talladega Superspeedway with driver Jamie McMurray last year, Roush Fenway Racing sold the #26 team to Jenkins, a businessman and entrepreneur with a lifelong love for stock car racing. He and wife Sandy renamed their new venture Latitude 43 Motorsports in tribute to their homes in southern Vermont and coastal Maine, each situated along the 43rd latitude line.

Through the first 11 races of its fledgling life, Latitude 43 Motorsports has qualified for nine events, gathered five top-30 finishes, and refuses to be a "start-and-park" team that shows up merely for a paycheck, despite little or no sponsorship. Jenkins contacted the Air National Guard in Washington, D.C., and since mid-March has carried the military branch's colors on his cars as a tribute.

As he waited for a flight at the Manchester, N.H., airport a few weeks ago, Jenkins and a woman in uniform struck up a conversation. As it turned out, the soldier was an assistant to Command Sergeant Major Michael Parker of the South Carolina National Guard. Eventually Jenkins was speaking with CSM Parker himself, and last weekend Parker attended the Showtime Southern 500 at Darlington Raceway with four unlikely guests -- a group of teenagers.



CSM Parker is the man in charge of the South Carolina Youth Challenge Academy, a program built by the National Guard for at-risk 16 to 18 year-olds, assisting them in earning their high school diplomas and preparing them for adulthood. As a reward for outstanding achievements at the SCYCA, Parker and Jenkins arranged for an all-access trip to Darlington for four cadets.

<http://vtmotomag.blogspot.com/2010/05/jenkins-making-quiet-but-important-mark.html>

"The kids in the Academy have grown up in some challenging situations," said Jenkins. "It was an amazing experience to get to know them. They were all so intelligent, so polite, and you knew they were proud of themselves and how far they'd come. I wanted to give the kids a positive community experience like the one we have every week at the track. That's what racing is about."



Jenkins invited the cadets to participate in everything his team routinely does at the track -- they stood on top of the team's transporter to watch qualifying, they were front-and-center at driver introductions, and they sat on top of the pit box during the race with Jenkins and Stoddard as the team plotted strategies and made pit stops.

Stremme practiced and qualified well throughout the weekend and finished a season-best 24th on Saturday night.

"I didn't do anything special, I just wanted to give some kids a neat experience. They deserve it," he said. "Hearing their stories makes you look at your own life differently. It was very emotional for everyone on the team, and there wasn't a single person around last weekend that those kids didn't touch the lives of. I wish every team in NASCAR had the opportunity to give back like that. As a race team we had our best weekend yet, and I took as much out of meeting those kids as I did from the race itself."

Bill Jenkins may want to stay out of the spotlight, and that's fine. But for the work he's done so far in his short time in NASCAR, he deserves at least a little recognition.

*(PHOTOS: 1. David Stremme at speed at Darlington Raceway; 2. Stremme (third from left) and Command Sergeant Major Michael Parker (far right) with SCYCA cadets at Darlington; 3. Crew chief Frank Stoddard (left) makes a call from the pit box with SCYCA cadets looking over his shoulder. Photos by Getty Images for NASCAR: 1. John Harrelson; 2. Jerry Markland; 3. Geoff Burke.)*

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