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Metro's Lakeisha Francois has a mission to give low riding a positive image through community involvement and working with kids. She is also a member of the National Low Rider's Association, which performs at different events, such as the Dec. 18 "Women of Destiny" dance. Seen here, a 1964 Chevy Impala.



Division 18 Operator Lakeisha Francois is a Low Rider with a Cause

By Reina V. Slutske

(Jan. 25, 2006) Usually, you can see Lakeisha Francois driving the 711 and 202 lines out of Carson Division 18.

But in her off-time, you may see her with one of her cars, a 1983 Cutlass Oldsmobile with hydraulics. It's painted lavender and silver, complete with graphics. She has another car, a 1967 Chevy Impala, that she's working on.

A Metro employee for nine years, she's not the image of a low rider. Dressed in a Metro uniform, relaxing on her break, she said, "I'm a

low rider. I work here."

A low rider is a person who drives a car that is adjusted to ride closer to the ground. They're usually equipped with hydraulic pumps that make the cars jump and do tricks.

Often, they have unique paint jobs and different features, and there are competitions for tricks and the nicest looking cars.

Didn't like it at first

Francois started low riding after her husband, Derell, introduced her to it. However, she didn't like it at first, because she was frightened when she was driving with him.

"But then I was watching, and I was like, 'Wow, this is cool,'" she said. "'This is nice the way they put this together and take part in it. I want to put together one,' so I did that."

She founded a car club, called Do Sumthin, which is part of the National Low Rider Association and one of 27 car clubs in California. Her husband is the president of the car club, and she's the secretary of the Association.

In addition to being about low riders, the Do Sumthin club members also decided to give back to their communities.

They have helped in various projects, such as Pastor Faye Newman's "Boxes of Love" program through Outreach Ministries, where they prepared boxes of food for less fortunate people.

With Do Sumthin's campaign, "Cruising for Christ," they've organized toy drives, participated in both the Watts and Compton Christmas parades, and helped coordinate events, such as a Hurricane Katrina benefit and upcoming business expos and car shows.

The image of low riders has been negative. Often times, the cars are associated with gangs, violence, drugs, and objectification of women. These are all images that Francois rejects.

Non-violence a creed

Francois' car club mission is to celebrate low riding as a sport and promote non-violence, with her goal of bringing people together.

"Wherever we go, our kids go," said Francois. "[With] all these kids around, we don't want them exposed to negative things."

She even gets her six boys involved, teaching them that there's more than gang life.

"I want to show them there are more things you can do than just hanging out, getting involved in gangs," she said. "Just because we live in certain communities doesn't mean you have to get stuck in that, there are other things you can do."

However, the stereotype still lingers. So much so, it's taken a toll on those who just enjoy low riding.

"[Police] tend to pull low riders over, even if they haven't been doing anything," she said. "Out of suspicion... figure that you're gangbangers."

Francois wants to give the sport a positive image, more about having fun and less about gangs.

"It's really fun to me, that's why I stuck with it, that's why I'm still doing it," she said. "I feel like I'm one of the ones that can bring it back."

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