

Published November 21st, 2012

A Transportation GEM: Going Electric in Lamorinda

By Cathy Dausman



Orinda residents Justin Joss, 15, and driver Jason, 17, enjoy a moment in their family's GEM. Photos Cathy Dausman

"That's pretty good," said Kregg Williams, owner of California Speed Sports in Livermore. "Considering the average driver puts just five miles on the car in a day, it takes a while to get that mileage."

Williams said Chrysler built the first GEM cars 10 years ago as a "gas credit" to offset their production of larger, gas-guzzling automobiles. They sold only 50,000 units nationwide. Then Polaris bought the GEM division, and Williams sees almost limitless potential for the Low Speed, or Neighborhood Electric Vehicle. He says they're perfect for campuses, apartment complexes, parking structures and gated communities. "Livermore Labs has lots of GEM cars, as does Stanford University," he said. Brother Dominic Berardelli of Saint Mary's College drives a Ford Think electric cart. He began using his personally-named "BroMobile" seven or eight years ago when he had difficulty walking across campus. Trinka Courtemanche, campus workflow coordinator, says the college owns a second Think and six other carts made by EZ Go.

Orinda Country Club has the Precedent by Club Car for use only on its golf course. Moraga Country Club members drive carts made by Yamaha.

Rossmoor has a rental fleet of 30, also Yamaha-made, said Director of Golf Mark Heptig. Some Rossmoor residents drive their own privately owned low speed vehicles within Rossmoor, said Communications Manager Maureen O'Rourke.

If there is a down side to owning a GEM, Jon Joss said it means they have to park another car outside. "The soft side doors are fairly easy to take on and off, but if they were easier, that would be a huge plus."

And Jason's friends sometimes "relocated" the GEM when he drove it to baseball practice. Yet even without a heated cab and minus power steering the GEM is the Joss family go-to car for running local errands. Justin, 15, the youngest, doesn't have his license, but knows he too will drive the GEM.

Jon and Allison Joss of Orinda have four sons and three cars, but they still have a handle on their gas and auto insurance bills thanks to a GEM, or Global Electric Motorcar. "I would estimate we save about \$500 to \$1,000 a year when we insure our three teenagers using a GEM as their primary car," Allison said. A GEM looks as if it belongs on the golf course. In fact, it does belong on the golf course, but it is also fully street legal.

In accordance with 1998 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration rules, the car is equipped with headlamps, tail lamps, stop lamps, reflectors, mirrors, a parking brake, a windshield, and seat belts.

Jon Joss golfs, so his GEM includes an after-market golf rack. Allison Joss chose the color red when she and her husband bought the two-speed model E-4 in 2007 from a now-defunct Martinez Chrysler dealer. Their oldest son, Alex, was 15 when his parents bought the car five years ago, and he found it "embarrassing." Younger siblings Andy, now 19, and Jason, 17, thought the GEM was cool. It seats four and its new "souped-up" battery allows what son Jason calls an "exhilarating top speed" of 30 to 35 mph, depending on terrain. The car gets 20 to 40 miles on a single overnight charge and has 5,000 miles on its odometer.



Brother Dominic Berardelli drives a Ford Think, nicknamed the "Bro-Mobile"

Reach the reporter at: cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA