

12/22/00

Local auto legend kills wife, self

By Ralph Montañó and Mark Glover
Bee Staff Writers

Don Tognotti, whose name was synonymous with car customizing and auto-event promotions in the Sacramento area, was found dead inside his Fair Oaks home Thursday morning after authorities said he shot his ailing wife and then killed himself.

Sacramento County Sheriff's Sgt. James Lewis said Tognotti, 60, called a friend shortly before the murder-suicide to say that he and his wife, Paula Diane Tognotti, "were going to a better place."

When told of the 7:30 a.m. call, deputies went to check on the Tognottis at their expansive home in the 5100 block of Oak Canyon Lane, Lewis said. The deputies found the couple in the master bedroom.

No suicide note was found, but Lewis said family friends have told investigators that the shootings were motivated by his wife's health problems and his own financial difficulties. Paula Diane Tognotti, 58, who was known as "Diane" by friends, suffered for years from a painful and chronic medical condition

See TOGNOTTI, page A20

Tognotti: He faced 'mountain of debt'

From page A1

that kept her bedridden for the last few years, according to neighbors.

"He was very much in love with her," neighbor W.G. "Bill" Chatham said. "He used to talk about her all the time and he used to walk with her when she was still able. He was a very devoted person."

From spacious quarters at 2509 Fulton Ave., Tognotti operated Tognotti's Auto-Truck World, selling car parts and accessories of every stripe. The Tognottis' son, Dean, and a daughter, Denee, work at the store. Another daughter, Dena, recently moved to the Bay Area.

Since 1977, the business has ranked as a must-visit destination for local car enthusiasts and hobbyists who retrofit, remake and restore vintage cars or who work on their own recently purchased, late-model wheels.

But more than that, Don Tognotti's reach extended into the whole regional culture of hot rods, car customizers, motor vehicle restorers and auto racers.

Tognotti promoted scores of auto shows and races in and around Sacramento for decades. He was a partner in the West Capital Raceway and promoted races there until it closed in 1980.

Last year, the West Capital Raceway Alumni Association inducted Tognotti into its Hall of Fame. The association is made up of key figures from the track that was the site of races from 1947 to 1980, under the Interstate 80 overpass on West Capitol Avenue.

In one of his most high-profile local efforts, Tognotti acquired the Sacramento Autorama show in 1991. The annual February event — held for the 50th time last year at Cal Expo — features a large display of custom cars and meticulously restored vintage motor vehicles.

On Feb. 8, 1991, Autorama founder Harold A. Bagdasarian announced that he had sold his 50 percent interest in the Show Promotions organization to fellow Sacramentan Tognotti, his partner for the previous five years.



Don Tognotti



Paula Diane Tognotti

would have wanted it that way.

"Everybody's completely devastated," he said.

News of the tragedy brought Ken Pierson, 56, of Elk Grove to the store. He said he started buy-

ing parts for his race car from Tognotti's in 1970.

"I'd come in once a month to pay my bill and he would be joking and laughing with me," said Pierson. "Don always had a lot of irons in the fire, but I never thought he could do something like this. I had no idea."

Bill Hall, a Sacramento businessman who restored several cars with Tognotti's help, has known Tognotti since their college days.

"I've known Don for nearly 50 years and I don't know anyone I've regarded any higher than him," said Hall, who said he last talked to Tognotti on Wednesday night. "He was a man of high integrity."

Bagdasarian described Tognotti as a level-headed man who never let on that he was troubled.

Like her husband, Diane Tognotti put on a strong public face.

"If you saw her, you'd have never thought she had a bad day in her life," Bagdasarian said.

She loved to spend summers at the couple's ocean-side home in Monterey, but had been unable to because of her health problems.

Bagdasarian and neighbors said Diane Tognotti suffered from a chronic inflammatory bowel disease.

Under Tognotti's direction, Autorama featured not only the work of craftsmen known nationwide, but also that of local restorers and mechanics who typically put hundreds of work hours into a single vehicle.

Tognotti was always pushing new business deals, Bagdasarian said. It wasn't until recently that Bagdasarian learned of the "mountain of debt" that he was trying to outrun.

"He was robbing Peter to pay Paul and it was all catching up to him. There was no way out. It was going to bury him and he knew it," Bagdasarian said. "He sold the Autorama because he couldn't get anyone to loan him \$10."

Tognotti sold the Autorama event in 1999 to Dan Cyr of Portland, Ore. At the same time, Tognotti sold the Grand National Roadster Show to Cyr, but Tognotti continued to be involved in assorted auto-related events throughout the region.

Tognotti opened his first automotive shop in 1964 in a 1,100-square-foot store at 16th and T streets in Sacramento. Two years later, he moved into a 10,000-square-foot building at 19th and T streets and at about the same time opened a tire store at 16th and W streets.

A local auto customizer who worked with Tognotti at various Autoramas, said Thursday that he was "trembling right now. I am in shock. I cannot believe what I am hearing. What a tragedy.

"This was just a great guy to work with ... a guy who really loved cars and car people. It's just a real loss. You can't believe how much this guy loved to be around car people."

The store was busy with Christmas shoppers on Thursday afternoon.

There was no formal statement from the business, but Sales Manager Dan Trabue said employees were trying to carry on with business as usual because. "Don