

FROM UNSKILLED LABOURER TO MASTER ARTISAN - MAKING THE BEST OF OPPORTUNITY

Spraypainters play an important role in the autobody repairs industry. Applying the right colour paint and finish to vehicles, they make sure that the newly painted areas match the rest of the repaired vehicle. Meet Frans Paulus, a seasoned spraypainter, employed for the past 22 years by leading autobody repairer, Oppermans/Thiels Body Works, located in Windhoek's Southern Industrial Area. This is his story.

VILLAGE BOY

Born at Omungete near Ruacana in Omusati, Frans Paulus grew up a typical village boy tending to the family's livestock and tilling the mahangu fields. Severe droughts undermined the family's farming operations and they relocated to Oniipa in Oshikoto, where Frans enrolled at the Oniipa Combined School.

"Village life is hard work and from a very young age, you are taught the importance of hard work and to earn your keep. But, droughts are never easy. Although still a youngster, I could see how it impacted on my parents. It broke their hearts seeing our livestock deteriorating to the point where there was no hope. Investing time and energy into ploughing and planting our fields, we couldn't harvest much, as the rains stayed away", Frans reminisces.

"We had no option, but to pack up our belongings and move to Oniipa. A new environment, a new school and new friends; it all happened so fast. But, as a family we had to do what we had to do, because we didn't have much of a choice. But we stuck together. The hardship made us stronger", Frans adds.

CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Frans harboured dreams of becoming a teacher. "I had a huge admiration for my teachers: the way they were always smartly dressed and the respect they commanded in the community. Dedicating your life to educating others and empowering them with knowledge and skills was also something that appealed to me. That was the dream: to one day qualify as a teacher and to also dedicate my life to service", he explains.

"Perhaps my career dreams also had to do with the fact that those days, we didn't really know much about other career options. Mine worker, police officer, nurse and teacher: these were the options we were familiar with and open to us. Back then, I didn't even know what a spraypainter was; let alone any of the variety of technical trade occupations the youth of today can choose from", he adds. It wasn't to be, however. Upon completing Grade 7, Frans had no choice but to leave school and to make his way to the capital city to find employment. "As a young boy, moving to the big city to find a job was



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Frans Paulus

Spraypainter

daunting. But, I had no choice, really. I simply had to find a way to make some money and help in the upkeep of my family”, Frans shares.

INFORMAL APPRENTICESHIP

Unskilled and untrained, Frans ended up assisting an informal autobody repairer. “This gentleman, Mr. Moses, had ventured into fixing damaged vehicles and ran a small business from his home. He took me under his wing; teaching me how to knock out smaller dents from body panels; how to mix and apply body filler, and how to scrape off excess paint and filler material. Mr. Moses was my mentor and I was his apprentice”, he recalls.

“I think it helped that Mr. Moses was a very patient man. I made many mistakes, but he would always encourage me to keep on trying. Looking back, I guess I can say that his patient demeanour rubbed off on me, because in this line of work, you need to have patience in delivering quality work. For a spraypainter, patience doesn’t mean slow; it means doing it right and getting it right”, Frans emphasises.

Frans’s skill improved with time and under Mr. Moses’ watchful eye, he enjoyed exposure to other aspects of the work. “I got hooked. Seeing how the body panels we fixed and prepared ended up being re-sprayed and refitted to make the damaged vehicle look brand new, I made a promise to myself that I was going to carve out a future for me in this industry”, he adds.

NEW JOB

Frans soon struck it lucky, when he was recommended to the Oppermans/Thiels Autobody Repairs, and where he duly started as a labourer in the autobody preparation bay, earning a reputation as someone always willing to put in the hard hours.

“I started here in 1997, under the supervision of Mr. Opperman, the owner. A stern and demanding man, he was the one who taught me the finer tricks of the trade in preparing vehicles for spraypainting and repairs. Working here was worlds apart from my time at Mr. Moses. The workshops here were much more sophisticated. Tasks were clearly divided. Everyone had a specific job to do and you had to stick to those tasks”, Frans notes.

Panelbeating is hardy work - preparing vehicles for the final step of spraypainting requires a good mix of practical and creative skill and a high level of attention to detail. “I was really able to hone my skills. As I said already, it is about doing it right and getting it right the first time. You do not want to prepare a vehicle that gets turned away when it reaches the spray booth. You want the spraypainter to agree that the vehicle was properly and well prepared”, he emphasises.

CHANCE OPPORTUNITY

“If there was one part of my work I didn’t like, it was the scraping part. It’s physically draining, let alone the dust residue that ends up all over. Often, you would miss the bus home, because it took you too long to clean up. I was watching the spraypainters from afar and said to myself that I needed to find a way to get into that line of work. I mean, one has to move up in the world”, Frans chuckles.

Frans grabbed the opportunity when it presented itself, to exchange his hammer and skates for the spray gun and nozzles. “One day, the spraypainter was not there and the owner’s son had to step in. He would spraypaint a little, and then would go off to attend to new client quotations. It went on like this a few times and when he had to attend to a quotation again, I took up the spraygun”, explains Frans.

“He wasn’t angry when he got back and found me spraypainting. Instead, he started training me, there and then. After demonstrating a few times, he left me to continue and when he came back later, he was happy with my work. He then showed me how to apply the clear coat. And from thereon, I was a spraypainter”, he adds.

Frans’ transition to becoming a spraypainter nearly ended as abruptly, as it has started. When the owner returned the next week and found him busy in the spray booth, Frans was nearly dismissed. However, his supervisor intervened. “In fact, the owner showed me the door and didn’t want to listen to my explanation. Only when my supervisor stepped in and explained what had happened, did he agree to give me a chance. Soon, he too, was convinced that I had what it takes to do this job”, he shares.

FURTHER TRAINING

Recognising Frans’ innate talent, Oppermans/Thiels Body Works decided to invest in his potential. “At first, through in-house apprenticeship and under the watchful eyes of more experienced spraypainters, I got to hone my skills. I learn best by doing. Like these sponges we use to wash off the body panels; I absorbed all I was taught. There was no way I was going to make mistakes and ruin this golden opportunity”, Frans notes. Ongoing training is important in this line of work.

New vehicle models and lines enter the market every year, each with their own and unique paint mix code. “We have the technology to mix paints in-house. It is therefore important that we get training on these new colours, codes and mixing. With the introduction of eco-friendly paint mixes a few years ago, we also received training offered by female trainers from South Africa, who shared with us the finer details of paint tinting and mixing paint to the right shade and texture.”, he explains.

PERFECTIONIST ARTISAN

Mixing paint to perfectly matching colours is child's play for Frans. His well-trained eyes and high level of attention to detail not only stand him in good stead; but more importantly, add value to his employer's reputation as a service provider that assigns a high premium to quality work and client satisfaction.

"I think what makes me a good spraypainter, is the fact that I started at the bottom rung of the panel preparation process, which made me to develop a keen eye for any imperfections. Before, I apply any paint, I need to do a thorough inspection and identify any shortcomings. If I identify dents and cavities or when I detect substandard preparation work, I have no choice but to send it back. I cannot waste time and resources on spraying a panel that doesn't meet our strict quality requirements", he stresses.



Spraypainting is a specialist skill; and Frans is a master - well versed in the art of selecting and adjusting the appropriate spraygun nozzles and applying different paint mixes and types, in order to get the proper paint flow and coating thickness.

"There is much more to spraypainting that meets the eye. It's not merely about picking up a spraygun and getting on with it. The vehicle's panels needs to be cleaned and prepared well. You need to adjust your spraygun and select the right nozzle. You must consider the airflow. Then it's about your hand movement and establishing lines. Merging different coats and layers. How far should your nozzle be from the panel to ensure even spread. You need to know what you're doing", Frans highlights.

FAMILY MAN

Having been in their employ for over 21 years, Oppermans/Thiels Body Works considers Frans as one of its most valuable employees. "This company is my family. They took a chance on me and have supported me throughout - from my early days in the preparation bay to where I am now as one of the penultimate gatekeepers in our autobody repair work. I continue to grow and I wake up in the mornings looking forward to come here and do my best for my employer", says Frans.

Away from the noisy workshop and fume spray booths, this father of 23 children uncoils and unwinds by spending time with family and friends. "My family is very important to me. Raising so many children is not easy, but I try my best in doing my best for all of them, and instilling in them an appreciation for hard work. If you work hard and believe in yourself, you can achieve anything", he says.

"I had not education and no one told me to take up the spraygun. I did so myself, because I wanted to grow in my career path. Through hard work, I've mastered this skill. Through hard work, anything is possible", he concludes.

Frans Paulus: Loyal, skillful and competent. His story teaches us that when a window of opportunity appears, we should not pull down the shade. That often, something valuable can be derived out of adversity. Through taking up the spraygun, he was able to create opportunity in his difficulty; a decision that has changed his life for the better and a decision that continues to serve him well. He continues to work the dream. He is living his passion.

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