

Black (and White, and Yellow) Panther Party

Since 1979, Ford's body-on-frame Panther platform has done duty in its big, V-8-powered sleds. Bolted under such cars as the Ford Crown Victoria, the Lincoln Town Car, and the Mercury Grand Marquis, the Panther has borne its share of scofflaws, socialites, and bluehairs on its sturdy back. Now, after the 2011 model year, the Crown Vic is done. This means the Panther—and, indeed, the domestic body-on-frame sedan itself—is mere roadside carrion. We think it deserves better. Herewith, a send-off to an old friend and a glimpse of what will replace it in police

TAXI TOUGH by BRETT BERK

> HOW NEW YORK CITY'S MIDTOWN OPERATING CORP. KEEPS ITS 205 CROWN VICS HACKING.

RON SHERMAN'S grandfather started what would become Midtown Operating Corp. back in the 1940s when he and some high-school friends invested in six New York City taxi medallions, those metal plaques that officially designate a cab as street-hailable. Sherman got into the business with his dad in the 1970s after doing time in construction and used-car sales. This makes Sherman's 23-year-old daughter, Danielle—an NYU economics grad and the company's current VP—a fourth-generation hack. "We didn't even realize that," Sherman says, beaming at her in their shared office at Midtown's Queens headquarters, "until someone pointed it out."

Midtown now operates one of the busiest and most successful fleets in the city,

with 205 licensed cars running two 10-hour shifts per day, seven days a week, each clocking about 100,000 annual miles on what Sherman calls the "toughest streets in the world." And every one of the company's vehicles is a Ford Crown Victoria, the pasture-bound, body-on-frame, rear-wheel-drive sedan that replaced the Checker Marathon as the iconic yellow cab in the '80s and '90s.

Keeping these vehicles running—and able to pass the shop's twice-daily once-over, and the Taxi and Limousine Commission's (TLC) thrice-annual inspections—requires an operation bigger than Latka Gravas's. Sherman has a staff of 31 guys who work around-the-clock in nine lift-equipped service bays, a full-service body and paint shop, and a carwash; they're aided by two tow trucks and two service cars (each fitted with a push bar made from a pair of Checker Marathon fenders).

Sherman also has \$500,000 worth of spare Crown Vic parts squirreled away in the block-wide site. "Everywhere you look,



pany has bought since the '80s. Sherman's cars cover so much terrain, and in such intense conditions, that they serve as rolling labs for Shell, which uses them to test experimental lubricants. Shell collects samples every 10 days when the oil is changed and runs them through a spectroscope. "Anything that goes wrong with your body, it ends up in your blood or urine," Sherman explains. "A car is the same. Anything that goes wrong will show up in the oil."

Given the makeup of Midtown's fleet, you may wonder how Sherman is dealing with news of the Crown Vic's demise. "We've been trying to get our ducks in a row," he says with an enforced calm. "But when the Crown Vic goes away, there's not another approved vehicle at the Taxi and Limousine Commission that works for my operation." He turns up his palms. "We need a commercial-grade, fleet-grade, purpose-built vehicle. It took 20 years and \$50 million to perfect the Crown Vic. You can't just paint any passenger car yellow and put it on the road. It has to be taxi tough."

it's parts," he says as he provides a tour. This includes rows of transmissions and seat cushions stacked on wooden shelves, a Mayan pyramid of batteries piled on a pallet, an old closet crammed full of tires, spider webs of brake lines in the rafters, a deck of windshields propped up in a hallway, and a 55-gallon drum brimming with brake rotors. Not to mention the seven full shipping containers out in the parking lot (one with several spare body shells piled atop it) and the jumble of bolts, brackets, and belts

housed in a labyrinth of tiny metal gym lockers down in the basement, which are organized by a system known only to the foreman, Huey. ("He's irreplaceable," Sherman explains.)

Want your mind blown? Since 1976, Midtown has replaced about 3500 windshields, 3500 transmissions, 70,000 sets of brakes, and 90,000 tires. They've performed 120,000 inspections, 250,000 oil changes, and pumped nearly 50 million gallons of gas, mostly into the 4000 Crown Vics the com-