

El Toro High School – 1984-1985

Moving to California – Sounded Like a Good Idea

It seemed like a great opportunity: move to California, stay with my Uncle and Grandmother, and experience the wonderland my older brother had told me about. He had lived there before me and said it was a good experience.

But I soon learned that the price of admission was too high. My Uncle was from the "old world" where parents forced their kids to be who they wanted to be, instead of letting them be themselves. Rock music? Banned. T-shirts and sneakers? Forbidden. Dating? Out of the question.

So, I did what any 15-year-old would do: I found ways to get around the system.

The Jumpsuit Revolution & Auto Shop Takeover

El Toro High didn't have a huge drama program, but it had something even better: Auto Shop.

Since my Uncle was responsible for fleet maintenance on buses, he had a ton of mechanic jumpsuits lying around. At first, I figured I'd get teased if I showed up wearing one. But I was tired of ruining my clothes or constantly changing in and out of work outfits.

When I finally showed up in a dark green jumpsuit with bright yellow stripes down the arms and legs, people laughed. There were plenty of "Buck Rogers" and "male stripper" jokes. But my first assistant foreman (just a buddy at the time) wanted one, too. Then my other assistants. Then, suddenly, everyone wanted a jumpsuit.

Since we controlled the tools, we got away with it. But the real kicker? Cleanup time. Everyone else had to start scrubbing their arms 15 minutes before class ended. Meanwhile, we kept working right up until the bell, then peeled off our jumpsuits, washed our hands, and walked out clean.

By the end of the semester, the entire class wanted in. Soon, other schools caught on. By the time I left, jumpsuits were standard in auto shop classes across the entire school district. To this day, you can still see them hanging on the walls of shop classes in Saddleback Valley Unified School District.

That first semester, I wasn't the foreman yet. But when the instructor saw that I had created an organized system that actually improved efficiency, I got elected Auto Shop Foreman the next semester.

The First Car & A Clever Side Hustle

My first car wasn't bought—it was claimed.

In the back of the auto shop, under a layer of dust and neglect, I found a perfectly good car—donated by an old lady, barely 30,000 miles on it. Since I was foreman, I had the whole class work on my car for oil changes, brakes, belts, and tune-ups.

I bought the parts. The class did the labor. At the end of the semester? My car was fully restored and ready to drive.

Of course, I still had to pay for it. So I got a job flipping burgers at Carl's Jr., rode my bicycle to work, and paid my auto shop teacher \$50 a week until the car was mine.

There was just one problem: I didn't have a license yet. But that didn't stop me from taking it for joyrides when Uncle & Grandma were out of town.

The Underground Fashion Operation

My Uncle had strict rules about what I could wear. No t-shirts. No Levi's. And absolutely, under no circumstances, a leather jacket.

So I created a secret wardrobe system.

In a drainage tunnel near the house, I stashed a brown paper bag containing:

- A t-shirt (because I refused to look like a nerd).
- A pair of sunglasses (for ultimate 80s coolness).
- A pack of cigarettes & a lighter (the unofficial currency of high school social life).

Every morning, I'd duck into the tunnel, swap outfits, and emerge looking like a normal teenager. The "approved" clothes stayed hidden until I came home.

For bigger wardrobe upgrades, Big-Tony let me stash a leather jacket and Levi's in his car trunk.

I never got caught. The system worked flawlessly.

The High-Stakes Race to School

Getting to school was its own challenge.

If I could make it one block down the street before Big-Tony passed by in his Mustang, I got a ride. If I was even a second late? He drove right past. No exceptions.

One time, he even saw me running full speed and still didn't stop—just to teach me a lesson in punctuality.

Drama, Storytelling, and Mr. Congeniality

The drama department was small but fun. I wasn't in major productions, but I did win "Mr. Congeniality" (which I didn't fully understand at the time).

More importantly, I had a small cult following for my writing. Every break, a group of 6-10 students would gather so I could read the latest pages from my notebooks full of short stories. If it was raining, we'd pile into someone's van just so they could hear the next part.

Friends, Fun, and Curfew Battles

By this time, everyone had cars. Jim and Dan both had classic Mustangs. Sean had his mom's beat-up yellow station wagon (but hey, it got us places).

After school, we'd hang out at Big-Tony's house, watching movies from his family's huge pirated VHS collection. We'd raid the liquor cabinet and smoke backyard plants.

Meanwhile, I had to be home by 6:00 PM—which was stupid. My friends all had normal curfews (9-10 PM).

Of course, I found ways to work around that, too. But that's a story for another day.