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LaToya Ruby Frazier & Dan Kaufman, "What Happens to a Factory Town When the Factory Shuts Down?," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2019

## The New York Times Magazine



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**CRUSA**

What happens to a factory town  
when the factory shuts down?

**PHOTO ESSAY BY  
LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER**  
*Text by Dan Kaufman*

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arly in the morning on Nov. 26, 2018, Dave Green, the president of Local 1112 of the United Auto Workers, which represents workers at a General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio, received a call from the plant's personnel director. Green needed to be at the plant at 9 a.m. for a meeting. The personnel director rarely called Green, and when he did, it was almost always bad news. Green got into his car — a silver Chevy Cruze — and sped toward the hulking 6.2-million-square-foot factory, which had manufactured nearly two million Cruzes since the car was introduced in 2011.

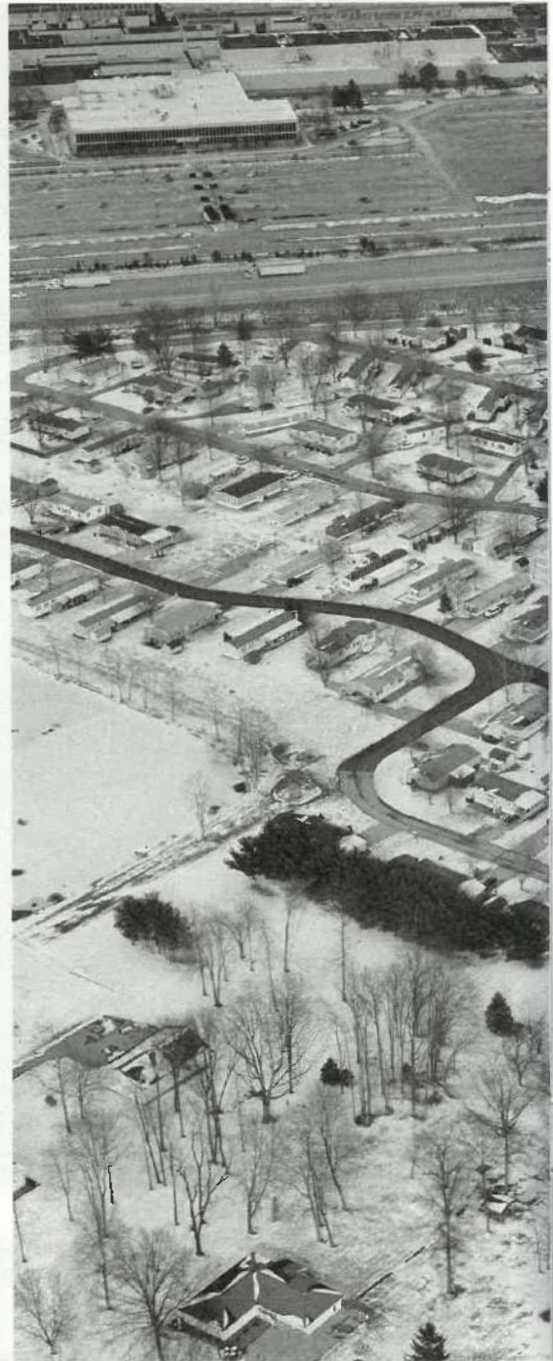
"Management walks in 15 minutes late," Green recalled, "and they say, 'Hey, we're going to unallocate the plant' — that was it."

Green had never heard the term before, but he soon found out that it meant his members would no longer have a car to build. The Cruze was finished, and G.M. had no plans to make anything else at Lordstown. Green followed the managers to the production floor, where they shut down the assembly line before repeating the same brief message to more than a thousand workers. "Some people started crying, and some people turned white as a ghost and looked like they were going to throw up," Green said. "It felt like, 'Oh, the end is coming.'"

On that same day, Mary Barra, the chief executive of G.M., announced that the company would unallocate four other North American plants and cut roughly 6,000 unionized hourly positions and 8,000 salaried positions. The largest affected plants manufactured sedans, and sedans would no longer be a major part of G.M.'s domestic production; instead, the company would focus on building S.U.V.s and trucks, which generate much higher profits.

Barra's decision reflected many trends: declining small-car sales, an increasingly overvalued dollar that makes American exports more expensive and the continuing rise of American automobile manufacturing in Mexico, where autoworkers make an average of \$2.30 an hour (last year, G.M. became that country's largest vehicle manufacturer). It was yet more evidence of G.M.'s retrenchment from American manufacturing; since 2005, the number of states with active G.M. assembly plants has fallen to seven from 16. With the idling of Lordstown's plant, Ohio became the latest casualty on that list.

Though Lordstown was already operating far below capacity — it had eliminated its second and third shifts in the previous two years — the news still came as a shock. The company had received a \$50 billion bailout from American taxpayers only a decade ago, and now it was making near-record-breaking profits. Manufacturing trade publications like *IndustryWeek* heralded Barra's "willingness to wield the ax," while Wall Street investors cheered the shedding of the "legacy" costs — pensions, health insurance — associated with G.M.'s American workers. On the day of Barra's announcement, the company's stock closed nearly 5 percent higher.

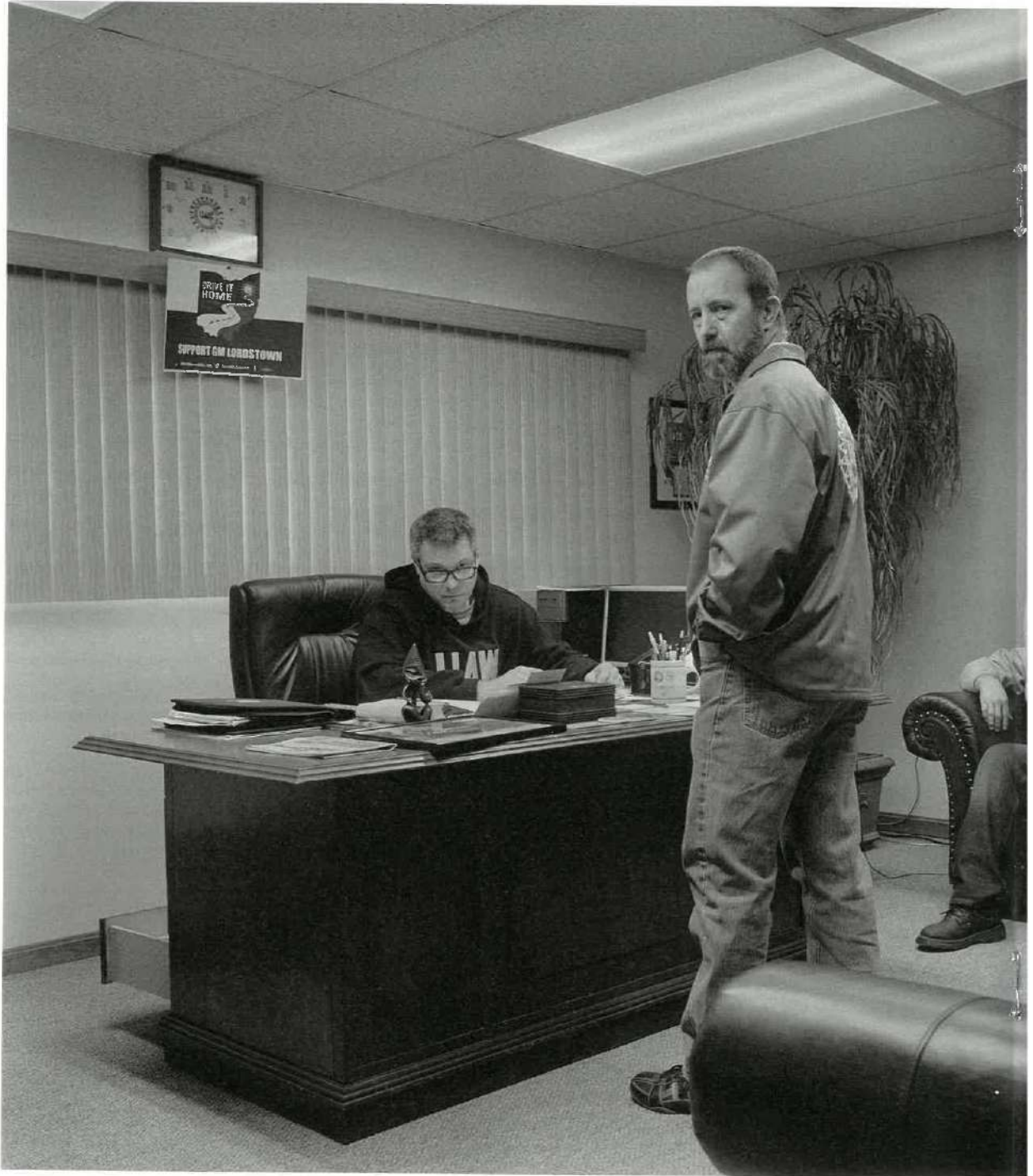


*The village of Lordstown and (at top) administrative office and part of the assembly line at the General Motors plant. Opening pages: Workers entering the plant in February.*

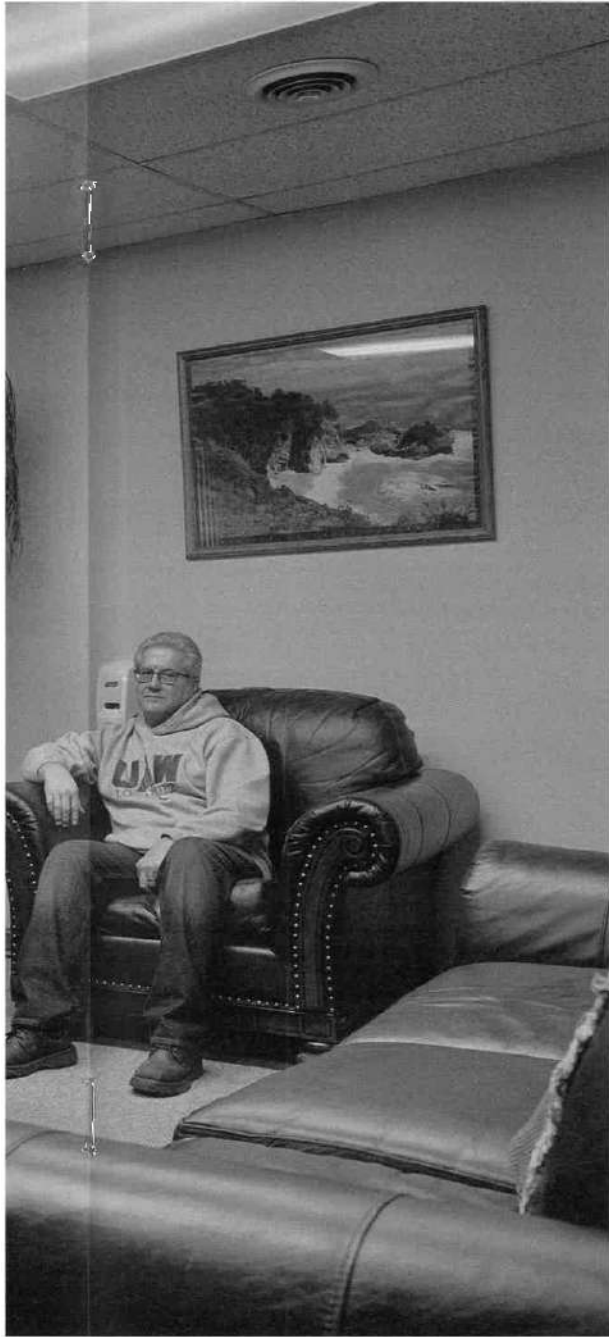
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or the residents of Lordstown and the surrounding area, Barra's decision promised disaster. A recent study by the Center for Economic Development at Cleveland State University estimated that the elimination of all three shifts at the plant would ultimately cause the loss of nearly 8,000 jobs and more than \$8 billion in economic activity in the regional economy.

And since the 2008 financial crisis, wages in the area have fallen by 6 percent, even as they have risen nationally by 11 percent. "They're scraping out what's already been hollowed out," Green said. "We need G.M. It's the last thing standing around here."

The Lordstown plant has been a pillar of the regional economy since it was built in 1966. G.M. constructed the then-state-of-the-art facility (it included 26 robot welders) in the middle of a cornfield 15 miles northwest of Youngstown. It chose the site because of its distribution possibilities; half the population of the United States lived within 600 miles of it. Lordstown quickly became an important addition to the thriving, heavily industrialized Mahoning Valley, whose center was Youngstown ("Steeltown, U.S.A."), which, after Pittsburgh, was the second-largest steel-manufacturing city in the United States. Since 1966, the Lordstown plant has produced more than 16 million vehicles and more than a dozen different models, including the Chevy Impala, the Chevy Vega, the Pontiac Sunbird, the GMC conversion van and the Chevy Cavalier.

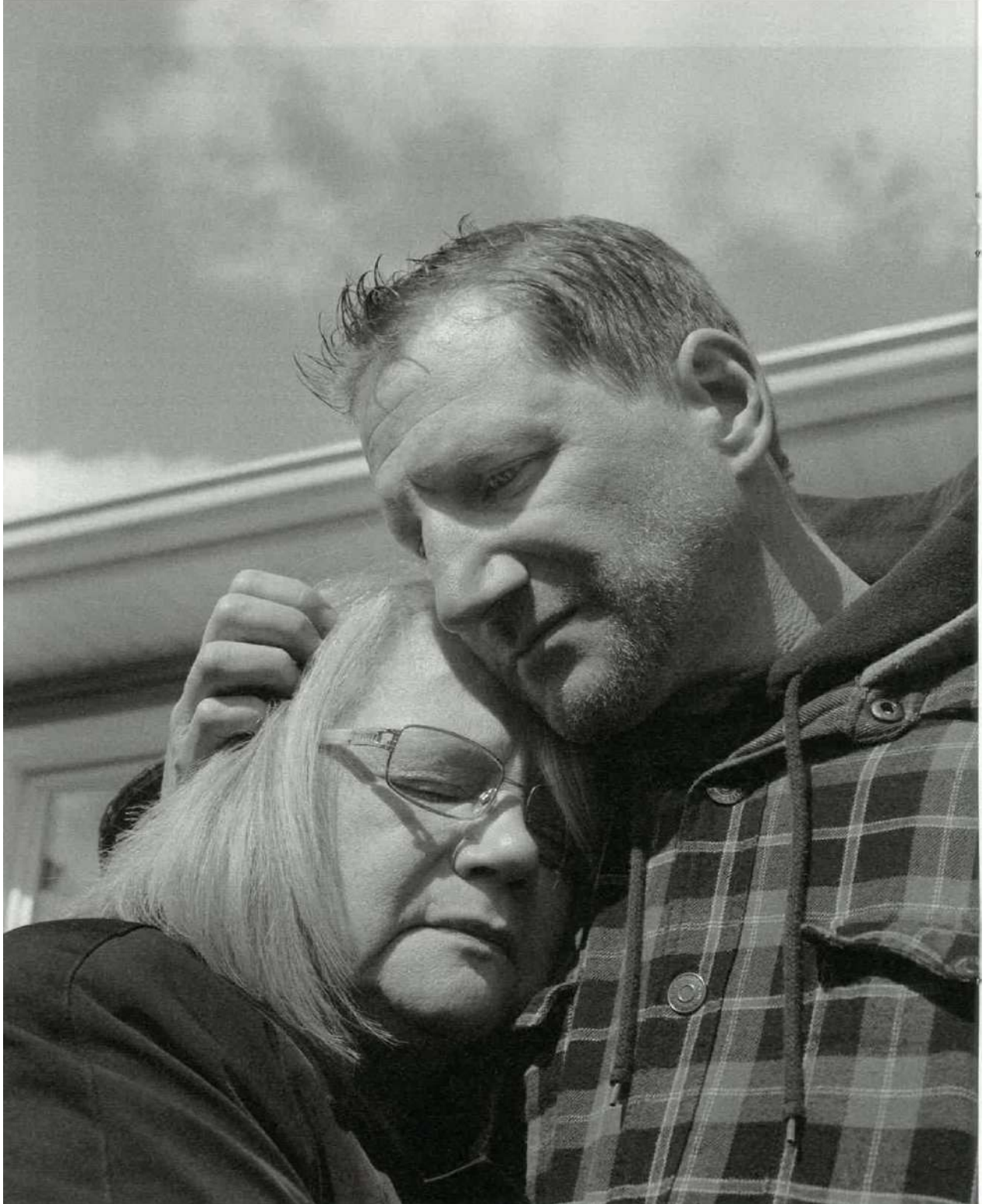
People in the valley take immense pride in this heritage; G.M. cars and trucks are ubiquitous here, especially the fuel-efficient Cruze, which, at a time when gas prices were high, helped lift G.M. out of bankruptcy. Though profit margins are thin on the Cruze, it remained one of the company's biggest sellers; last year, G.M. sold 143,000 Cruzes in the United States, the sixth-highest in volume out of the 38 models the company sold here.

The U.A.W. has made significant concessions to help G.M., most notably in 2007 when the union accepted a contract that created a two-tiered system, with new hires forgoing a pension and earning roughly half of what traditional workers made. Just two years ago, Lordstown's U.A.W. bargaining committee agreed to a giveback worth \$118 million in order to keep producing the Cruze in Lordstown.

Now the workers would be jobless. As December turned to January, they wrestled with their options. They could put in for a transfer to another G.M. plant far away, or they could wait, in the hope that the U.A.W. could pressure G.M. to restore a product to Lordstown. Some had already transferred, and others planned to go back to school or hunt for a new job nearby, while many feared the arrival of an "involuntary job offer" that would force them to relocate to a specific plant or lose their benefits. Some held out hope that the union leadership in Detroit would be able to undo the unallocation decision. In February, the U.A.W. filed suit against G.M. in federal court, arguing that "unallocating" the plants is a synonym for closing or idling them, both of which the union asserts are prohibited in the current four-year contract that expires this fall. As that suit moves forward, the U.A.W. has promised to fight hard to save Lordstown in contract negotiations planned for this summer. In the meantime, G.M. announced that the final shift at Lordstown would be on March 8.

*Dave Green, the president of United Auto Workers Local 1112, in his office with the local's financial secretary, Rick Smith (standing), and vice president, Tim O'Hara.*

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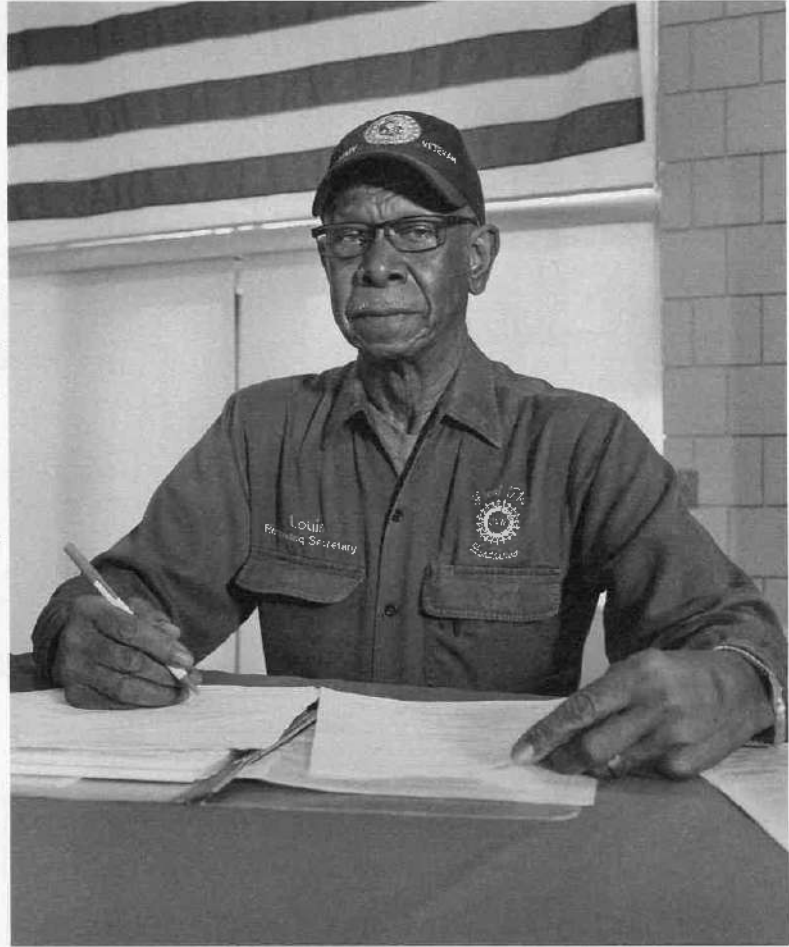
## **JONATHAN ACHEY JR., 45**

*Body shop*

I think that today, a lot of the time people don't appreciate what they have. I've never not appreciated my job at G.M. or what it could do — not just for me but for my son, for my wife, for my family. I get that from my father. He taught me not to take stuff for granted, and that's what I tell my son, Michael.

Thank God my dad was lucky enough to spend 35 years at Lordstown. He bought a house a couple of miles away from where he grew up, where my grandparents lived. And I loved the fact that, when I was a kid, it took us not even 10 minutes to go to the place where my dad grew up. I thought that was the coolest thing ever. And right now, Michael has that option: He can go to my mom's house and say his dad was born and raised in that house.

My whole life has been General Motors. I have 28 years invested in the company that is doing this to me. I understand it's a business, and they have to make decisions when it comes to business. If this is what they feel they have to do, then I'll have to accept it. But it's hard when you see money going to other places, when you see C.E.O.s making the money they're making. Do I feel like I got slapped in the face? Absolutely. It definitely feels like a smack in the face. But am I going to let that determine who I am after 45 years? No, I'm not. I'm not. I can't, and I won't.



*With the minutes from a meeting of his union's retirees' chapter.*

## **LOUIS ROBINSON JR., 77**

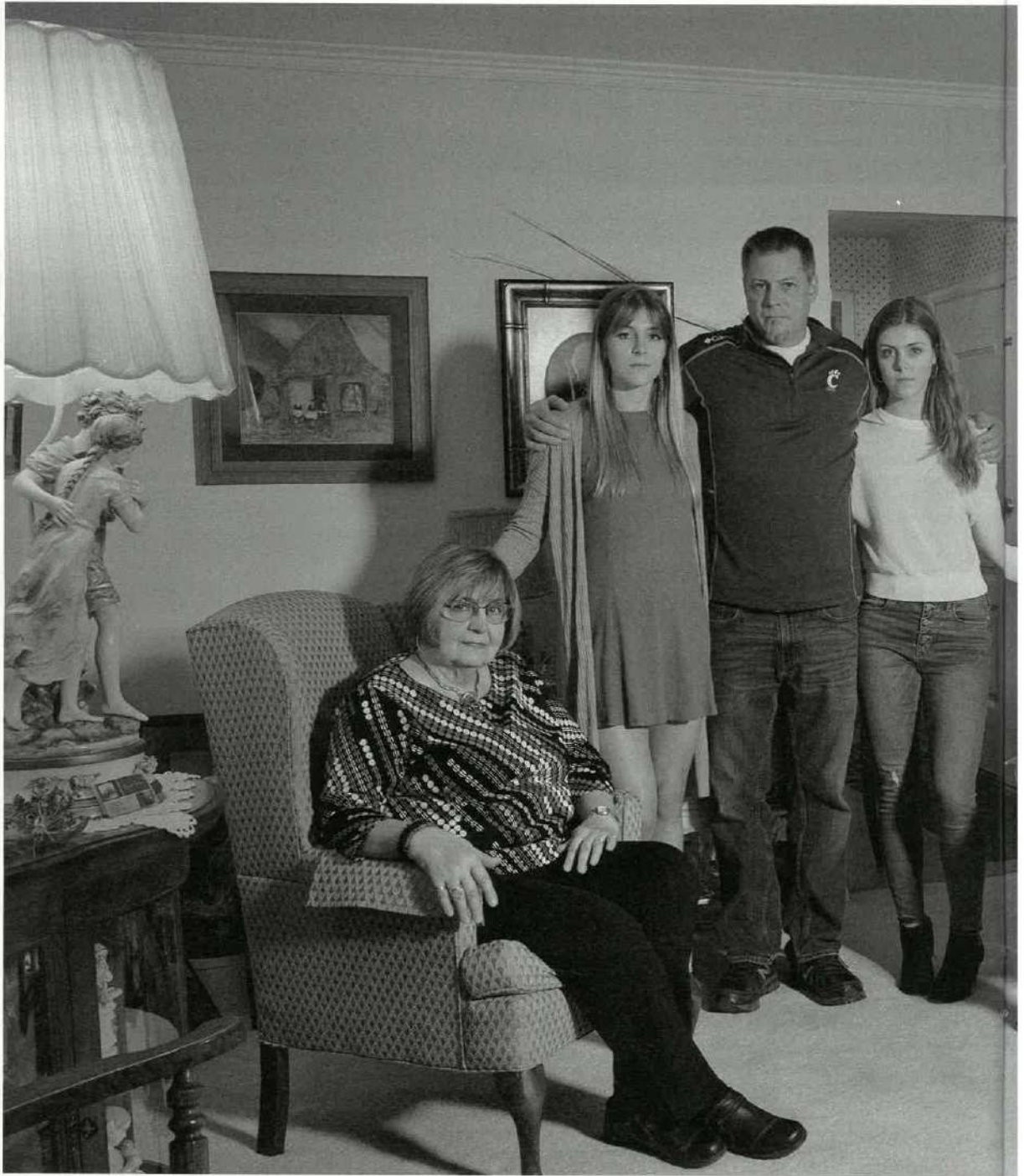
*Recording secretary for Local 1714 of the  
United Auto Workers from 1999 to 2018*

One mistake the international unions in the United States made was when Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers. When he did that, the unions could have brought this country to a standstill. All they had to do was shut down the truck drivers for a month, because then people would not have been able to get the goods they needed. So that was one of the

mistakes they made. They didn't come together as organized labor and say: "No. We aren't going for this. Shut the country down." That's what made them weak. They let Reagan get away with what he did. A little while after that, I read an article that said labor is losing its clout, and I noticed over the years that it did. It happened. It doesn't feel good.

*With his mother, Kathleen.*

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**DAVE GREEN, 49**  
*President of Local 1112 of  
the United Auto Workers*

Unions aren't just about making more money. It's about having a seat at the table. It's about having the ability to talk to your employer and be respected, having some dignity in work, having some dignity and respect in what you do.

People keep saying: "Well, I feel sorry for you. Your plant's closed." It ain't closed! It's unallocated! If the company would come out and tell us that the plant is closed, then I could process what I would think about my kids and where they're going, and about my parents and how they're feeling, and about what plant I could go to. But I can't think that far ahead because I'm not in a position to leave. I can't transfer out right now. I ran for this job 10 months ago, and I got elected. I'm going to leave now? I have to wait until all this plays out.

What the hell does "unallocated" even mean? I don't know. We have specific language in our national agreement that talks about a "closed" plant status and an "idled" plant status, but there's not any language that talks about "unallocated." So they've come up with this word to put us in a situation where: A, the contractual language doesn't fit for this specific situation, and B, they're kind of skirting their obligations, right? If we were in closed-plant status, there would actually be more benefits for our members right now. But we're not.

So I'm going to ride this out, and if the plant does close, I'll figure it out then. If it doesn't, then I'll stay here and get to give good news to people. That's the hope.

*With his daughters, Alison and  
Cate, and parents, Elaine and Royce.*

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As the March 8 stop date drew closer, union meetings grew more fraught. Members were fearful about the future and angry at G.M. and Mary Barra, who they noted received nearly \$22 million in compensation last year. Some were frustrated over the union's diminished leverage. A few members reflected on their fathers' militancy in the early 1970s, when

G.M. managers pushed to nearly double the speed of the line so it could produce 100 Chevy Vegas an hour, even as it cut the number of workers at the plant. The managers' effort was met with strong resistance. Workers rebelled against the brutal pace of the line by staging wildcat strikes, using absenteeism and even sabotage. The uprising peaked with a three-week strike in 1972 that focused not on wages or benefits but on reclaiming the workers' value as human beings. Reporters called the rebellion "Lordstown syndrome," and it became a nationwide synonym for working-class disaffection. One article in Newsweek said the Lordstown strikers had created an "industrial Woodstock."

But the early '70s turned out to be a high-water mark of working-class leverage; in 1973, the weekly earnings, in real dollars, of nonmanagement private-sector workers reached its peak. The precipitous decline came soon after and can be marked by another local event: Black Monday. On Sept. 19, 1977, Youngstown Sheet & Tube announced without notice that it would be closing the larger of its two mills, laying off 5,000 workers. By the mid-1980s, virtually all the steel and steel-related industry — some 50,000 well-paying jobs — had vanished from the Mahoning Valley as a similar process of deindustrialization played out in the Rust Belt. Still, as recently as the early 1990s, the Lordstown plant employed close to 10,000 U.A.W. members.

Despite its weakened bargaining position, Local 1112 remains a lifeline for its workers. Dave Green spent many of the days leading up to March 8 fielding desperate calls from members seeking advice on whether to put in for a transfer to another plant or to stay put on the chance that G.M. would give Lordstown a new car to build. At a transition center in the union hall, laid-off assembly-line workers help members obtain unemployment benefits, improve résumés, find job openings and apply for plant transfers, a speculative process that offers no guarantees. U.A.W. members can request a transfer to another G.M. plant if there is an opening; priority is given based on seniority. A U.A.W. worker who was hired before October 2007 receives a pension after 30 years of service. For someone who has worked full time at G.M. for, say, 24 or 25 years, it is difficult to throw away those years of investment.

This had already been happening for many years with other G.M. plants that have been idled or closed. One worker at the transition center, Christina Defelice, said she knew plant workers who arrived at Lordstown after four other transfers, or had been commuting from Pittsburgh or even from as far as Tennessee to keep their families on their health insurance or make their 30 years. She said she knew of a number of divorces, nervous breakdowns and even three suicides caused by such dislocation. Now those out-of-town transplants might have to move on again, joined by hundreds of Lordstown's newly unallocated workers.



*Members of Local 1112 at a meeting at the union hall in Lordstown before a chili cook-off.*

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## SHERRIA DUNCAN, 48

*Paint shop*

When I was hired, my mother took me to work with her and showed me the ropes. I was terrified, and my mom was like a mama bear looking over her cub. I didn't find out until years later that she had so many friends at the plant who would say, "Your daughter went here for lunch" or "She was talking to that person" or "These guys were looking at her." She was on the women's committee and the election committee, so when she retired, I joined those committees.

Family is important to us, and the possibility of having to leave the area is hard, because our family would probably be separated. Both of our mothers help a lot, and we really rely on our parents because we work separate shifts. A lot of times we have to work mandatory Saturdays, so we're really left with one day each week for quality time.

Jason and I would go days when we literally didn't see each other. I felt lonely a lot, because he worked the afternoon shift so he could put Olivia on the school bus in the morning, when I was at work. Usually I get off at 3:30, but there are days that they'll tell you at the last minute, "You have to stay until 4 o'clock!" Well, Olivia gets off the bus at 4, and Jason is already at work. My mom's on standby, but I feel like a burden.

They say "Family first" at G.M., but it isn't true, because they don't understand that a lot of people have children in school. So that's very scary if we have to transfer plants, because we won't have that safety net.

*At home with her daughter, Olivia; her mother, Waldine Arrington; and her husband, Jason Duncan.*



*Outside the Lordstown plant.*

## WERNER LANGE, 72

*Protester*

This is my 40th day out here. I usually stand up on the corner there, and the workers come out around 3 p.m., at the end of the shift. A lot of them will stop by and say, "Thank you very much!" They bring hot chocolate, coffee, gift cards for Starbucks and McDonald's. I get hugs.

This plant is in our blood, and it's in our bones. Corporations can't control these people. I'm talking about myself, too. I taught school for most of my life, 40 years of sociology at the college level, most of it just over there at Kent State. I grew up with this plant. The best thing about this valley is the sense of

community. We are committed to family, committed to the community, and all we want to do is have a living wage so we can raise our kids and our grandchildren and have a few minutes of leisure.

But all of that is at stake now. It's almost like a dying patient here. Where's the righteous anger? Where's the outrage? Where are the mass protests? The power is there; it's just untapped. We want to give it a spirit of resurrection, and if that doesn't work, try insurrection. I'll be flying my Spirit of '76 American Revolutionary flag. That's what that's all about.

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*In the Lordstown High School band room with her friend Monet Hostutler (right).*

## CINDY HIGINBOTHAM, 18

*Student*

I was kind of scared and sad when I found out about the plant. My father has lived next to Lordstown his entire life. We know everyone.

I'm scared about moving, but I'm trying to be brave about it. I know it's going to be hard, because I'll be going into a new school. I have to make new friends, and I'm not really social.

I want other kids to just be brave. Be there for your parents. Give them moral support, give your family support and make sure they are O.K.

I wasn't O.K. at first. I don't want to go. All my friends don't want me to go, and I know it's hard to leave friends. But if you have to leave something, you have to leave and go on with life. It just goes on.

## VICKIE RAYMOND, 49

*Paint shop*

My father was a city kid in Cleveland; my mom was only 17 when they got married. We lived in Windham until I was 6, and then a guy my father worked with at the plant told him about a house in Hanoverton. They came out and looked at it, and they liked it because it had land and room, and it was quiet and safe. That's where they lived for 43 years.

It was just an old 1800s farmhouse with five acres, but we felt like we were on "Little House on the Prairie." It had horsehair plaster with wood slats and no dry wall at all. It had newspapers in the walls as insulation; it was very cold in there. My dad and my mom did the majority of the remodeling themselves. They put vinyl siding on it and installed new windows, and they painted it yellow with light-green shutters.

When my dad passed away in 2013, my mom wasn't able to maintain the home. I would go over every day after work to clean it, vacuum it, dust it, whatever she needed. I'd do the outside maintenance, planting flowers and gardening, staining the deck, power washing. When my mom had cancer, one thing that bothered her most was worrying about what was going to happen to me because of G.M. idling.

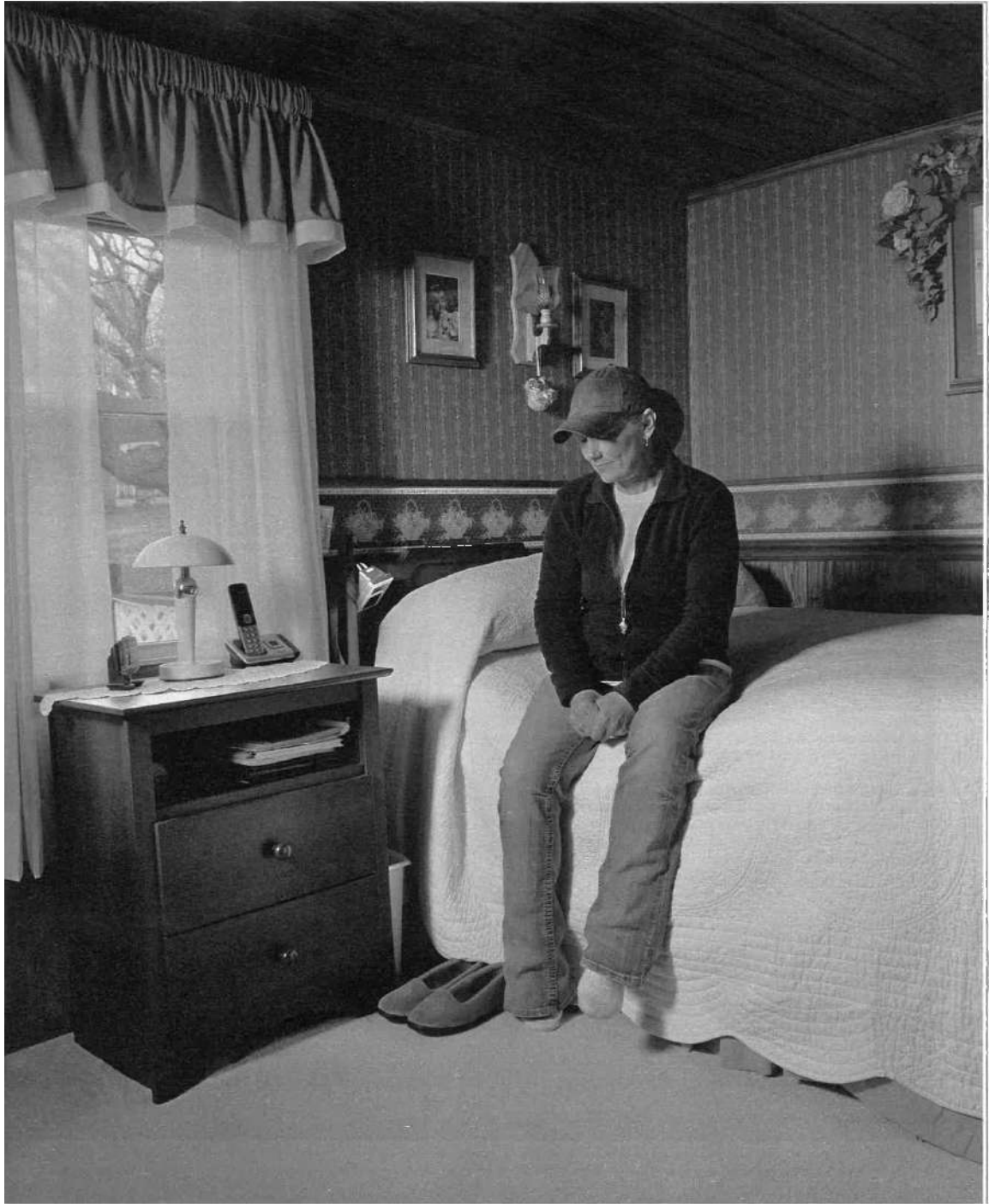
I don't want to let our house go, but it has to be done. I made a promise to my mom before she passed. I promised her I wouldn't let our place sit there without another family in it. You can't let an old farmhouse sit there too long, because things start falling apart.

## *At her parents' home.*

Interviews by LaToya Ruby Frazier, except Werner Lange, who was interviewed by Dan Kaufman. They have been condensed and edited.



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he last Cruze came off the line on March 6, two days ahead of schedule. That afternoon, workers gathered on the shoulder of a turnpike exit next to the plant for a celebratory protest. Dave Green and a few others gave brief speeches, and a local folk singer played a version of Bruce Springsteen's "Youngstown," with revamped lyrics to reflect Lordstown's struggles.

Afterward, people ran into the road, whooping and hollering at the honking cars and tractor-trailers before dispersing in the bitter cold. The last Cruze remained inside the plant, awaiting a final inspection.

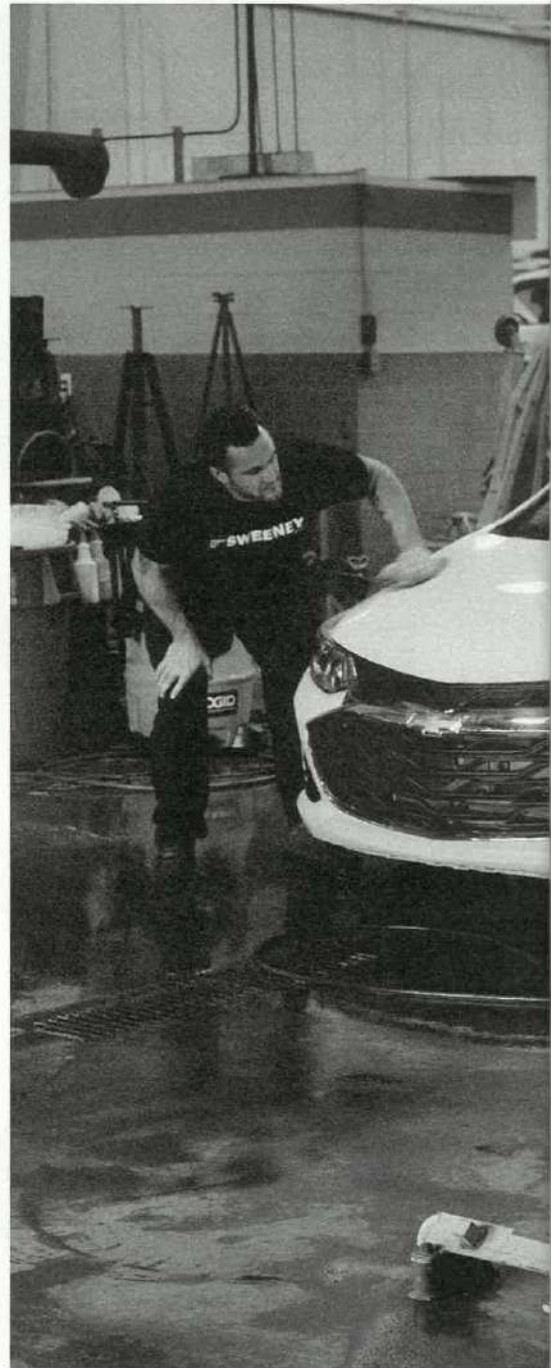
Two days later, workers loaded the final vehicle onto a car carrier in the plant's gigantic parking lot. It was destined for Sweeney Chevrolet, a dealership in Youngstown. The car had already been sold, but its owner wanted it displayed at the dealership so people might swing by to see it.

At Sweeney, Clint Renforth, the truck driver who delivered the last Cruze, lowered it almost tenderly off the carrier. The shutdown would change his life, too. Renforth has delivered Cruzes to North Carolina, Long Island and Mississippi. "These cars from the plant are our money loads," he said. "We get paid by the mile."

Ron Davis, one of the Sweeney detailers, drove the Cruze into the dealership's garage. He spent the next two hours cleaning, waxing and polishing the vehicle to make it immaculate for the showroom. As he worked, a small crowd of employees gathered. Lisa Cartwright, a service cashier, had brought in her father's blue G.M. Lordstown work shirt, perfectly cleaned and pressed, and a letter the company wrote him in 1965, confirming his interview for a job at the unfinished plant. "My dad passed away seven years to the day," Cartwright said. "He put 39 hard years in there, but it gave our family food, clothing and shelter."

By then, the last Cruze had already come to be much more than a car. It was a token of the most coveted working-class possession: a secure, well-paying job with health insurance and a pension. It had also become a major issue in the 2020 presidential race. Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign relied heavily on the promise of restoring manufacturing jobs, a message that helped him win Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. Significant to his Ohio victory was flipping the Mahoning Valley from blue to red. In the summer of 2017, Trump visited Youngstown, signaling the importance of the region to his re-election prospects. "Don't move; don't sell your house," he said. "We're going to fill up those factories." In a sign of how concerned he may be about Lordstown's closing, he recently took to Twitter to personally attack Dave Green, who had appeared on a Fox News segment about the plant, writing that Green "ought to get his act together and produce."

At Sweeney, Davis opened the trunk of the last Cruze and found a collection of handmade signs that Lordstown workers had placed there. "We will survive," one read. When Davis was finished, he drove the car into the showroom, where the dealership's fourth-generation owner gave an interview to a local broadcaster. As they talked, Davis kept wiping down the car. "I'm just trying to clean it a little extra good," he said. ♦



*Ron Davis (left) and Mark Wittman, detailers at Sweeney Chevrolet in Youngstown, preparing the last Cruze for the showroom.*

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