

weekendspeed

SHE KNOWS HER CARS

THE ENGINE WOMAN

This woman has made a name for herself in the high-performance car business

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WHEN her siblings' toys were broken, she was the one they turned to for help to repair them.

Even as a child, Wong Siew Lee had a knack for all things mechanical. The sixth of eight siblings quickly realised that she was meant, in her own words, "to hold a screwdriver, not a pen".

Although her father wanted her to complete at least her Secondary Four education, he eventually relented and allowed the then-13-year-old Siew Lee to quit school and work in his car audio and accessories shop.

There, she learned how to install radios in cars and began to appreciate the intricacies of different models. She also started tinkering under the bonnet and could soon strip an engine and put it back together.

Not everyone took female mechanics seriously then. "There were nasty guys who came into the shop saying: 'I think you women should stay home to cook'", she recalled. "But I didn't give a damn because



I liked my job and knew I could do it well."

Today, the 45-year-old Siew Lee is a director of Garage R, one of the best-known parallel importers in Singapore.

The other director is her eldest sister, June, while the company's affiliated workshop and tuning house – Fong Mui Garage R Trading – is run by her younger brothers, Chin Yan and Lester.

It was, in fact, a challenge from Chin Yan some years back which led Siew Lee to

prove that she could not only fix cars, but drive them well.

"There were only one or two women who were active on the local motorsports scene at that time, and he said winning a trophy in a women's category was no big deal," she said.

"He made me angry. So, I took part in a race in the same category that he participated in – and beat him! That was when I got hooked on speed."

Garage R now deals mainly in Japanese sports cars, including the Honda S2000, Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution and Nissan Fairlady. And Siew Lee believes her past experiences help her guide customers in making the right purchase decisions.

"I try to help them understand what they want out of a car," she says. "I also look at their occupations and what kind of image they want to project before giving my suggestions."

She also feels that as a woman, she can look beyond just the technical specifications of a car when making a recommendation.

"I also have many female customers, who feel comfortable talking to me," she added.

Some attitudes haven't changed, however. "I've had male customers who – when they see June and I here – say 'what do you know?' to us, just because we are women," she lamented.

But such incidents don't put her off. "I have no regrets about not finishing my education," she said.

"I love my job and I can happily work seven days a week. I feel good just looking at these 'babies' in the showroom."

Siew Lee, who is single, will soon have another "baby" to call her own. She has just ordered a 480bhp twin-turbo Nissan GT-R.