When Kevin Hulstein was a freshman at Willmar High School, a guidance counselor called him in for a heart-to-heart talk. What kind of career do you want, she asked? He replied honestly. “I told her I wanted to work in professional auto racing,” recalls Hulstein. “That’s all I’d ever wanted to do.”

The counselor put aside her skepticism and helped Hulstein design a program that allowed him to spend his senior year of high school taking classes at Ridgewater College, pursuing a degree in auto mechanics. From there, a NASCAR career would require only a leap of faith and a little luck.

It took fellow Ridgewater grad John Rannow a few years longer and a near collision with his own mortality, but like Hulstein, he has used his college education and his own determination to build a career working on the world’s fastest cars.

Hulstein and Rannow not only have dream careers, but they’re also in the middle of one of the country’s hottest entertainment industries. NASCAR’s popularity exploded in the 1990s. In 2006, an average of 5.4 million households watched a typical NASCAR race on television, up 43 percent from 10 years earlier, according to Nielsen Media Research. The sport attracted $42.3 million in advertising revenues on top of billions in sponsorship fees. Two reasons for the growth: America’s enduring fascination with cars and the “average Joe” appeal of its drivers. “Dale Earnhardt was a good example,” says Rannow. “People could identify with and cheer for him because he was an average guy.”

Family connections
Hulstein’s fascination with cars and racing started at Willmar-area go-kart tracks. His father, Wayne, was a psychology instructor at Ridgewater. (His brother, Jason, currently works in the college’s information technology department.) For
fun, the family raced go-karts on the weekends. “I started racing with my family when I was about 6,” recalls Hulstein, “and between ages six and 14, I raced about every chance I got.”

Things changed, however, when his father died. “After that, go-karts just weren’t fun for our family anymore,” he notes.

Hulstein’s mother encouraged Kevin and his brother to continue racing, however, and agreed to sponsor a stock car that he would drive. Hulstein’s love of speed and machines resurfaced, and for several years he was a regular at Central Minnesota race tracks, including the KRA Speedway in Willmar and Viking Speedway in Alexandria. Through his family’s involvement in racing, he got to know Roger Canon, an instructor in the auto body department at Ridgewater. It was Canon who advised Hulstein that if he wanted to pursue NASCAR seriously, he would have to move to North Carolina. “About 90 percent of NASCAR teams are based in and around Charlotte,” Hulstein says. “To get these jobs you almost have to know someone.”

After graduating from Ridgewater’s Auto Mechanics Technology program at age 19, and after an 18-month specialty course in race car mechanics in Houston, Hulstein moved to Charlotte. He did some racing in the area and through a friend of a friend, landed an interview at Hendrick Motorsports, which owns four NASCAR teams (Jeff Gordon, Jimmie Johnson, Kyle Busch, and Casey Mears). Hulstein started out “basically sweeping floors,” but soon got a chance to use his mechanical skills. “At Ridgewater I developed a strong mechanical background,” he says. “I learned the basics and was able to adapt that to the work I do here.”

While race cars are more advanced than street cars, there are similarities between the vehicles. “A race car is much more precise, but a lot of the safety features built into regular cars were developed in racing,” says Canon. “That’s one reason car companies put so much money into sponsorships. They learn a lot from racing.”

Hulstein now works as a road mechanic for the No. 5 Kellogg’s/Carquest Chevrolet vehicle driven by Kyle Busch in the Nextel Cup Series races. The job keeps him out on the road about 180 days a year, attending most of the 36 races held during the February-to-November season. As a road mechanic, Hulstein takes care of “everything underneath the car.” He also works with the data acquisition systems on the cars.

These are used to download information from more than 75 sensors measuring performance and stresses on the cars. Hulstein credits his training in auto electrical systems at Ridgewater with giving him the skills to operate the more complicated data acquisition systems.

While Hulstein attends all the races and is often under the car when it is off the track, NASCAR fans are not likely to see him during any of Busch’s pit stops. “The car chief says I’m too valuable for that,” says Hulstein, only partly joking. “Pit crew jobs are dangerous.”

Race cars run somewhat differently from regular cars, despite NASCAR’s roots as racing for street cars. The car bodies and their engines are built essentially from the ground up, with every component designed to maximize speed or keep the driver safe. The engines are tweaked constantly and matched against the complicated set of rules and specifications that NASCAR requires. Engines on super-speedway cars, like the ones driven in the Daytona 500 and other large-track races, run at more than 750 horsepower, without turbochargers and superchargers. They can run that fast because the engines themselves are big—V-8s that are 5.87 cubic liters in size compared to between 1.6 and 4.5 cubic liters on a typical sedan. The engines are also designed to move air and fuel through the car with as much speed and power as possible. The engines do not have mufflers, catalytic converters, or fuel injectors.

As car engineering has progressed, competition among race teams has gotten tighter. “On any weekend, with 50 teams in a race, 30 of them could win,” says Hulstein, adding that the competitiveness of NASCAR appeals to him the most. “At the level we are at, the little things matter most. It takes meticulous preparation to have everything running right.”

No more hesitation

John Rannow came to NASCAR later in life than Hulstein, but with no less intensity. A 1993 graduate of Ridgewater’s Auto Body Collision Technology pro-
gram, he had always been interested in NASCAR, but didn’t think he had time to pursue that dream. He finished school, got a job at Swenson Motors in Willmar, was married, bought a house, and had kids. Then, at age 28, he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Over the next year, he endured four surgeries and other treatments for the disease. When the cancer went into remission, he and his wife, Jenni, talked about what to do next. The answer: NASCAR. “The cancer makes you realize how simple life is,” says Rannow, who has been clear of cancer for six years. “It could be gone tomorrow.”

The two began looking for work in the Charlotte area so Rannow would be close to NASCAR’s vortex. Five years ago, Jenny got a job as a preschool teacher; John in a body shop. They sold their house, pulled their kids out of school, and moved to North Carolina. “It was the best thing we ever did,” says Rannow. “We love it out here.”

It took about a year—and a little help from Kevin Hulstein, who Rannow had met through Roger Canon—before Rannow was able to get on a NASCAR team. He also works at Hendrick Motorsports, doing the body work on cars driven by Jimmie Johnson and Jeff Gordon.

Each NASCAR team builds about 15 cars for use in different types of races, Rannow says. His job involves doing body work as well as painting the cars. Even the exteriors of NASCAR automobiles are built to tight specifications, which have been translated into about 30 templates for various parts of the body. The cars get to the paint and body department as bare steel. Rannow’s first job is to build out the templates and make sure they fit properly and that the spaces between them are filled. The body is primed and then painted with the distinctive number and sponsor-logos of each driver. There are five people in the paint and body department and it takes them about four to five days to go from bare steel to paint.

People skills
Rannow and Hulstein are typical of Ridgewater students in their love of racing, says Canon. About half of the students studying auto mechanics or auto body are involved in some kind of racing. “They’re all car people,” he says.

But Rannow and Hulstein have exemplary skills working with people as well as cars. “They both were good students and good people,” says Canon. “They’re personable and outgoing. We try to teach more than just technical skills and knowledge. We want students to know how to be good people and good employees, too, because that’s how you keep a great job.”

Rannow admits that if it had not been for cancer, he might never have pursued his NASCAR dreams—and that would have been a loss. “Some days, you go to work and it feels like just a regular job,” he says. “Then they fire up one of those motors and the floor shakes and you realize where you are and what you do.”

Mary Lahr Schier is a Northfield-based writer.