

NUMMI, five years later: A family reunion

BY ANGELA JOHNSTON · JUN 1, 2015



Dennis Breckner sits next to another former NUMMI worker at the five year reunion in Tracy, CA.
ANGELA JOHNSTON

On April 1st, the lunch line at the Golden Corral Buffet in Tracy snaked out the door. It was full of people who hadn't seen each other in over five years.

This was a big reunion for people who worked together at the New United Motors Manufacturing plant in Fremont -- known as NUMMI for short. For 25 years the NUMMI factory made cars; every minute a car would come off the line. They were good, old-fashioned American cars like Chevy Novas, and Pontiac Vibes. But the people who were at the Golden Corral, also built Japanese cars, like Toyota Corollas, and Toyota Tacoma trucks.

It's because NUMMI was a joint venture between two giant auto companies: Toyota and General Motors. It was something totally unheard of before. NUMMI took over an old GM factory that was notoriously bad. It closed, but when it reopened Toyota,

turned it around overnight. More than 5,000 people from all around the Bay Area worked at the revamped plant.

But even this innovative partnership didn't last forever. In 2009, GM declared bankruptcy, and Toyota didn't want to keep running the plant. So the factory closed, and those workers lost their jobs.

This is the story of what they did afterwards -- how they picked up the pieces, and where they are now -- starting with the reunion at the Golden Corral buffet.



Betty Sull catches up with fellow NUMMI worker Joe Nevarez at the Golden Corral Buffet in Tracy.

CREDIT ANGELA JOHNSTON

One big family

Mostly, the NUMMI reunion feels like a big family reunion. Old friends catch up while waiting in line for their food. They tell jokes as they shovel Tater tots and fried chicken onto their plates. Some have retired, others have taken up new jobs, new hobbies.

“I’m a fisherman, a songwriter, a musician. I just released a new CD, that’s something I’ve been wanting to do, but I was working all those hours,” says former NUMMI worker David Botello.

People are dressed in old NUMMI sweatshirts and ball caps.

“Some of us have lost weight, some of us have gained weight, some of us have gotten older, some of us look the same,” says Betty Sull. I ran into her at the chocolate fondue fountain, talking to another woman she hadn’t seen in years. Across the room, Tony Camillo says he keeps up with people.

“I myself have lunch or breakfast with a NUMMI employee every two weeks,” he says.

There’s one big absence today. Sara Rogers was a tour guide at NUMMI. She gave tours of the plant to people five days a week for 11 years. She couldn’t make the reunion, but people were asking for her, and she would have recognized them.

“It wasn’t just I’m a tour guide, you know ‘here’s a tire, here’s an engine,’” she says. “It was more about ‘here’s a tire and here’s Bob working with the tire, here’s an engine, here’s Jason working with an engine.’”

A family with unique values

On her tours, Rogers started by telling people NUMMI’s key values.

She names a few: kaizen, kanban, jidoka, muda, genchi genbutsu.

Those are Japanese terms that mean things like “quality of the workstation,” “suggestion programs,” and “learning by doing.” These principles came from Toyota after they reopened the GM plant, and they defined the culture at NUMMI.

Then she’d drive around the plant. If you were on her tour, you’d watch big weights clamp down on sheets of metal to cut out pieces of cars. She’d take you past a section called ‘body and weld,’ where those cookie-cutter car pieces were welded together. As you traveled along the mile-and-a-half long line, you’d hear bells, whistles, and music that played when people pulled cords for help. She’d point out the car doors hanging on rails from the ceiling, show you how the seats and carpet were put inside.

“I would tell them stories along the way about some of the people, we would sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to people on the line because those were the folks that I worked for,” she says.

When production slowed in 1988, and again in 2008, Rogers says NUMMI never laid anyone off. It was their policy. They scaled production down from two shifts a day to one. The other shift took classes.

“They would learn more about personal protective equipment, or sexual harassment. They would take every class,” says Rogers. “I got to teach the history of Toyota. I mean, I could not have come up with anything to teach people more about what we meant, [than the fact] that no one got laid off...until the plant closed and the dream ended.”



Tony Camillo shakes the hand of a fellow NUMMI worker at the five year reunion at the Golden Corral in Tracy, California. Dennis Breckner, who is looking at the camera, organized the event. CREDIT ANGELA JOHNSTON

After the dream

On April 1, 2010, the last car -- a red Toyota Corolla -- rolled off the line.

“I remember I just started bawling right then and there, because that was my life, you know, I wanted to be the oldest living tour guide. I was going be there until I was 90. I didn’t want to retire, I’d stay there forever. I loved my job,” Rogers remembers.

The emotional side was just one part of it. On that last day, Rogers was worried.



Maryo Mendez displays a newspaper clipping where he made the front page of the San Jose Mercury News. He dressed up as Captain America to protest the factory's closure.
ANGELA JOHNSTON

“I saw people leaving,” she says. “I thought, there’s families in here. There’s multi-generations here. There are dads and sons and daughters, and three generations walking out the door, and this has been their livelihood forever. What are they gonna do?”

Picking up the pieces

Sara Rogers says one of her best NUMMI memories was a funny little joke she and the NUMMI team members would play on the tour guests. It went something like this: Rogers would have about a dozen or so people on her tram, and she'd be pointing out these giant high-tech, frame-building robots...

“And there’s sparks flying, and kids were getting excited, and I go ‘well ladies and gentlemen, I have a treat for you today, you’re the first ones and only ones to see this ... we don’t have our special robots out on the line because they’re under wraps, you’re not supposed to see these ... so ladies and gentlemen, please look to your left ...’”

At which point two of the workers, Willie Brown and Mario Perez, would stop whatever they were doing on the line, and start dancing “The Robot.”

“It was just so fun to have people react to them. That was what I wanted people to do, to see that these are human beings,” says Rogers. “These are not robots, these are real people and they live in your neighborhood, and you know, they get up every morning and they come to work.”

When the plant closed, Rogers was devastated, but she knew she'd be okay.

“I’m single. I have a dog. I knew that I didn’t need much money. I already paid off all my bills,” she says. “I had thought ahead about this.”

But she couldn’t stop thinking about Willie and Mario, and the others.

“Some people couldn’t even use a computer. They didn’t have to! But man they could put those doors on straight. Gosh, their pant jobs were excellent. Wow, the doors were shaped perfectly.”

And at NUMMI, people were rewarded for their hard work. They got great benefits. They never had to worry about doctors’ fees, job interviews, or making resumes. After the factory closed, they had to deal with all these real, human problems. And Rogers was tasked with helping them.

“I was just somebody to sit here and try and get people through some places that they’d never been before.”

Real people, not robots

Rogers and a few other workers were hired as peer counselors by the Alameda County Workforce Investment Board after the county banded together with eight other regions to open rapid response unemployment centers around the Bay Area. These were

places where people could sift through job postings, find out where to learn new skills, apply for health care programs, and talk with counsellors. Rogers says, though, that her most important work happened outside of the center.

“We were like ‘24/7’ because when do you get most down? About 9 o’clock at night, laying in bed, things are rolling around in your head,” she says. “We would get calls in the middle of the night, and that’s what broke my heart, that’s when real people would come out.”

She got calls about overdue mortgages. One man needed a liver transplant and no longer had health insurance. She had to convince people not to spend their \$50,000 retention packages overnight -- people got these so they wouldn’t quit before the factory closed. She’d call pharmacies all over the Bay Area trying to find the best deals on medications. She’d help people pay their bills.

“You’d see families fighting, and so families would get divorced. They thought they could only live and breathe and eat and walk and talk with that income at that place, with those people. And then you leave.”

“There were some suicides,” she says, after a pause. “What do you do with that information?”

She tried her best. These unemployment programs lasted almost three years; 5,380 people enrolled in the Alameda County one. Maryo Mendez was one of the first people Rogers saw.

Mendez was one of those guys whose whole family worked at NUMMI. “I started in the body shop working the night shift, and then I went to the line, and then I finally moved to conveyance, where you deliver all the parts to the line, that’s where my dad used to work,” he says.

When the plant closed, the very first thing he did was take a little vacation. But when he came back, it was go time. He started taking classes to get some new skills -- like a lot of other NUMMI workers, he got \$10,000 from the state for new training.

“I learned how to do the computer stuff, learned how to look at jobs,” he says. “I was trying to find something special, something that same pay. But there's not that many that had that pay.”

“I started dropping off all my resumes. I started going all different directions every day. I kept going further and I go, ‘you know what? First place that calls, I'm done. I don't care who it is, I'm just going to do it.’”

A year passed, and no one was biting. Mendez was 54, and couldn't retire yet. For him and his family of four, time was running out.

"I used unemployment, and I was running everything out. We were in the medical COBRA program, and that was starting to run out, and I was going, 'what am I going to do?'"

A system collapses

One of the reasons Mendez had such a hard time is that it wasn't just NUMMI that shut down -- it was all the other businesses that supported it. At the time, there weren't any other large auto manufacturing plants in the Bay Area. The factories that supported NUMMI were gone.

"That was their only account, and so when NUMMI shut down, they had no reason for being here," says Bill Browne. He works at a consulting firm called Manex. When NUMMI closed, Browne and his team surveyed 38 businesses and factories in Alameda County to see if they could survive. Most of them worked exclusively for NUMMI. They looked at companies that made seats, door panels, instrument panels, and engines. They visited each one, and checked things off a list.

"How are they going to reposition themselves from being a seat manufacturer to ... something else," Browne says.

Out of those 38 companies, only four are operating today. Take for example, Kennerley Spratling -- KS Plastics for short. They call themselves an "injection molding assembly house." Basically, they make plastic things, and they made plastic car parts for NUMMI.

Kevin Ahern, VP of Sales at KS Plastics, won't tell me the exact numbers, but he says in the 2000s KS plastics was shipping seven or eight truckloads of equipment to NUMMI every single day. Once KS Plastics knew what was happening with NUMMI, they needed to make some changes.

"You do two things. You take your existing customer base and you see what else you can be doing for them. And then, number two: you look at outside. You go find new customers," Ahern says.

They did both. They started making some car parts for plants in the Midwest. And then, the company started new contracts.

From car parts to toy cars

I put on a pair of safety goggles and Ahern takes me into the factory to show me what they're making now. We walk past huge molds that are getting filled with hot plastic -- 700-ton machines. Robots are moving these pieces of plastic up and down; forklifts are whizzing around.

When NUMMI closed, Ahern said it got really quiet in here. You could hear a pin drop. Now, it's humming. They're molding plastics for pools and hot tubs, biotech equipment, medical devices, and toys.

As we're leaving the factory, we walk past a bin filled with pink plastic toy cars. They're not exactly Toyota Corollas, but a nice nod to the past.

KS Plastics is doing well. They've actually expanded in the five years since NUMMI's closure, opened another factory nearby. And Ahern tells me, they've managed to rehire some of the people they laid off.

"Seventy-five percent of the folks that were displaced were brought back," he says. "And we could have brought back more."

A new job

Even with the rehiring, though, there were still people left behind. NUMMI closed during the recession. Just over a year later, the Fremont solar panel factory Solyndra unexpectedly filed for bankruptcy, and laid off thousands of workers, some of whom had just come from NUMMI. Only about half of the 5,000 or so people in the county unemployment program had new jobs. And that was the environment Maryo Mendez found himself in, almost two years after he lost his job at NUMMI.

"The last couple weeks before employment ran out, I got desperate," he tells me.

Finally, he got a call back from a Sears Automotive shop.

"I work on cars," he says. "It's okay... it's not the same. You know, you get greasy and dirty and it's not NUMMI."

Mendez works six days a week, for a lot less pay. And he only gets two days of vacation a year. But it's work. In fact, he works on some of the cars he made.

"I'm doing oil changes on them, and replacing axles," he says. "Some of the cars that we built, they got a lot of miles because the cars last forever. So, it's just it's funny, I just keep working on the same cars that I built or helped build."

Inside Tesla

Before Maryo Mendez found that auto shop job at Sears, he actually dropped his resume off at the building where he used to work. NUMMI wasn't there anymore, of course, but there were still cars being made inside. Electric cars.

Only a few months after NUMMI shut down, Tesla Motors snatched up the space. The 5.5 million square foot building was valued at \$1.3 billion, but because it was the recession, Tesla bought it for just \$42 million. When the rest of the auto industry was going bankrupt, Tesla began to thrive, and it gave former NUMMI workers like Mendez a tiny bit of hope.

"I concentrated on [Tesla] first. I got some leads from some people that were working in there," Mendez says. But he had no luck. He thinks it was because of his age.

"They wouldn't hire anyone over 50, so it was getting even harder to get in there, even when I had the perfect resume that the unemployment people helped me make."

The truth is that when Tesla moved into NUMMI it was still a really small startup. In 2012, the company was only making five cars a week, and didn't need that many employees. But it never released the numbers.

"The company has said informally it's been hundreds, but what exactly does that mean? 200 or 500?" says Harley Shaiken, a U.C. Berkeley professor who studies labor and the global economy.

"A lot of NUMMI workers who would've brought valuable skills, for whatever reason, didn't wind up at Tesla," he adds.

Today, Tesla has thousands of employees. They won't say exactly how many -- or how many used to work at NUMMI. Shaiken says that's a shame.

"This was one of the most well-known and successful automobile factories in the world. It pioneered labor management cooperation in important ways in the United States."

It was definitely revolutionary. NUMMI prided itself on making cars in an efficient, productive way. But Tesla says it's revolutionary too: changing the future of both auto manufacturing and driving.

Inside the Tesla factory

When I arrive at Tesla, I meet up with communications staffer Alexis Georgeson, climb into a golf cart, and start zipping around the factory, watching cars in every stage of the assembly process. First stop is the aluminum coil yard.

“So Model S starts with a giant roll of aluminum,” she says. “Each one of these rolls weighs about 20,000 pounds and they come into the factory, and then we unroll the sheets.”

At NUMMI, this is how cars would start out too, as giant rolls of metal. Those large sheets of aluminum are then stamped. Georgeson shows me this, too.

When Tesla moved in, they did some redecorating. They put in skylights, painted the floors bright white, and installed living plant walls. Some of the equipment in the factory came from NUMMI, and if you look closely enough you can see some remnants of the old line.



Tesla did some redecorating when they moved into the plant. They painted the floors bright white, and they bought lots of red robots. CREDIT RAJA SHAH

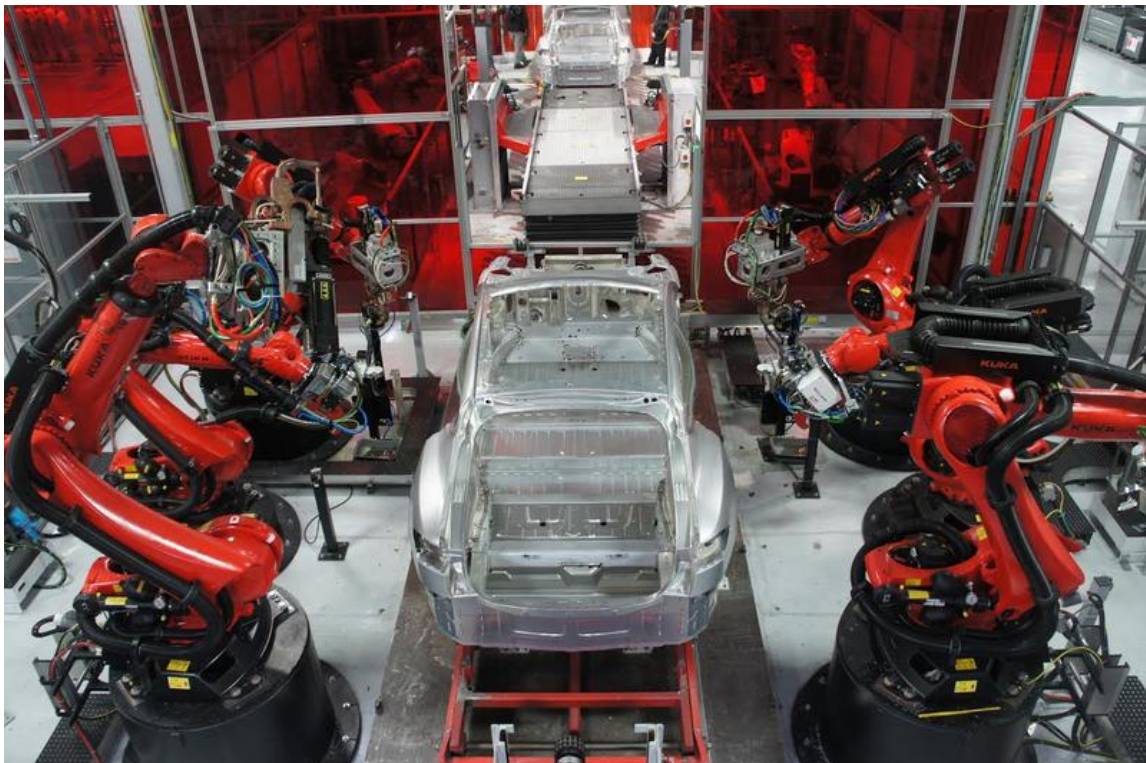
Other machines are new to the space. Tesla bought a lot of high tech-robots, and they're all painted bright red -- Tesla colors.

Georgeson stops the golf cart to show me robots that can do four different jobs at once.

Meeting the robots

The robots look lifelike, and they remind me of dinosaurs. As a car rolls down the line, the robots cock their heads all at once and then dive in toward the car, quickly screwing in bolts, welding, and drilling. Then they pull back and wait for the next car.

For the whole first hour of the tour, I was waiting to be introduced to a worker. I remembered Sara Rogers, the NUMMI tour guide, telling me about 'Bob' who puts on tires, 'Jim' who puts on the doors.



Tesla's special KUKA robots can do four different tasks. RAJA SHAH

"Xavier actually lifts Model S right when it's coming from the paint shop, and sets it down on the trim line," Georgeson tells me. And I get my hopes up.

But when when we finally meet him, I see that Xavier isn't a person. He's a robot, so strong that he can lift two-ton newly-assembled cars high into the air.

“They're the largest robots in the world,” Georgeson tells me. “They all have names based on Marvel comic characters, like Wolverine, Iceman, Thunderbird, Cyclops.”

Apparently Elon Musk, Tesla’s creator, is a huge *X-Men* fan.



A brand new Tesla Model S rolls down the line. CREDIT RAJA SHAH

Besides meeting a few of Tesla’s 200 robots, I didn’t meet anyone else on the tour. But Georgeson says the people are there, just doing different jobs. You can see evidence: vending machines full of earplugs and goggles, and popcorn makers stationed around the factory floor. She says these workers are excited about Tesla. “Because they know that this product that they're making is really changing the world.”

At the height of NUMMI’s production, they were making more than 400,000 cars per year. Last year, Tesla built and distributed 33,000. But, they’re growing. This year they hoped to ramp up production to over 55,000, and that the entire electric car industry would grow with them.



Tesla hopes to revolutionize the way we drive cars. They are working to bring the cost of their rechargeable car batteries down to the point where no one has to rely on gas modes of transportation.

CREDIT RAJA SHAH

A healthy county

Even though Tesla's vertically integrated -- meaning they make all their cupholders in house, instead of in outside factories -- their growth has been good for the county.

"It's very good, unemployment is down to five percent it's lower than the state," says Patti Castro, the director of the Alameda County Workforce Investment Board.

"This area produces 30 percent of the state's output in terms of manufacturing, so it's all good. The sad thing is when I reflect on it, it's like well, there's fewer people doing it. You have to keep that in perspective, they don't need as many people, so you always want to know, 'where people going to work?'"

Economist Harley Shaiken has similar thoughts.

"I think that the automobile industry is an advanced industry, it is part of the 21st century, as Tesla has shown us," he says.

But, he adds, the NUMMI closure also shows that you can't always predict what's going to work. Conventional wisdom says US auto plants closed because they couldn't adapt to the modern world. NUMMI did adapt, but ultimately it still closed. Shaiken says that points to a bigger structural issue.

"Simply to close a plant like NUMMI, which was so successful for 25 years and was the symbol of what could be done, to close it for the narrowest the financial reasons...I think there's something that's not right about that."



Sara Rogers looks through a book of letters kids wrote her after going on one of her tours. CREDIT ANGELA JOHNSTON

Packing NUMMI into boxes

At this point, no one is really keeping track of what happened to the NUMMI workers. There are just anecdotes about where people are.

Sara Rogers, the former NUMMI tour guide, still keeps in touch with a lot of them. She also keeps her own pieces of NUMMI in big boxes stacked in her garage. She's saved every note anyone has ever written her, and little artifacts from the factory, like a piece of paper that was pinned on the last car.

Rogers also owns a NUMMI car: a gold Toyota Tacoma.



Sara Rogers poses next to her NUMMI-made Toyota Tacoma. She knows the birthday of her car, named "Goldie." CREDIT ANGELA JOHNSTON

“I was gonna order a car, I couldn’t wait, I couldn’t wait, so I went out and I looked at a silver one, and I looked at a gold one,” she says. “And I got the gold one and of course her name is ‘Goldie.’”

And of course, she knows the car’s exact birthday. If you look on the inside drivers’ side panel you can see the manufacturing date.

“It was born, it left the company on June 16, 2001 at 9:43 p.m., so I wanted know who built it,” she says -- so she could go out on the line and thank them personally.

Jamie Hummer, Jason Mederios, Betty Jones, and Oscar Lemus, to name just a few.