It’s tailgate time in Blacksburg – a sizzle in the air, fans gathering on campus and all around town, anticipating another Hokie victory, the perfect fall setting for another thrilling football spectacle.

In Lot 8, there’s a Dodge van painted Hokie colors. No doubt that it belongs to passionate Hokie fans. But is that Don Lloyd on the air, talking about the exploits of Hokie quarterback Phil Rodgers and running back Roscoe Coles? Is Lloyd interviewing Virginia Tech’s young coach Jimmy Sharpe about the team’s wishbone offense? That portable television in the van – featuring solid state electronics and dial controls – is it black and white?

There is no such television in this van, and of course, Bill Roth and Mike Burnop are touting the skills of Logan Thomas and another corps of good, young runners. But you could be excused for expecting to experience such a scenario straight out of the mid-1970’s when you set foot inside Steve and Lori Wagner’s tailgate vehicle – an almost pristine-ly preserved 1975 Dodge conversion van.

The van, which has less than 20,000 original miles on it, was converted into a camper van direct from the factory in late 1974. Some of the original conversion features include a bathroom with sink, toilet and shower; a kitchen area with sink, mini-fridge and stove; a dining area with fold-out table and overhead storage units; a rear sleeping area where two adults can fully stretch out; and room for two more to sleep in the forward part of the vehicle (with adjustments such as hanging an elevated cot from hooks fixed to the interior walls). With the conversion came a propane tank to provide fuel for the stove and a small hot water heater and a battery to provide electricity to

Tailgating in ‘70s Style

By Karl H. Kazaks | Photos by Bonnie Bounds
interior outlets without running the engine or a generator. A fiberglass extension on the rear of the van added three feet to the vehicle, and the exterior was modified to allow hookups for power and water as well as ports for venting the stove and water heater.

The toilet and the cold water are still operational, but the propane tank has been removed, so no hot water or stove. When asked about future modifications like a kegerator, microwave, TV and satellite system, Steve just smiled, said “maybe” and glanced at Lori. He hopes to add a kegerator and upgrade the battery system, as well as get a generator to feed power for a microwave and television.

The van is so well preserved that most of the vehicle is original – the hinges on the overhead storage bins, the plastic radiator tank, the exterior chrome, the two green front captain’s seats, the Hemi 360 engine.

The Wagners are the third owners. The original owner was a furniture store owner who took used it for hosting cocktail parties. He kept it in a garage until 2009 when it was sold to his nephew, a Hokie fan. He replaced the original green and yellow shag carpeting with maroon carpeting and had the exterior – originally green and white – painted maroon and orange. The Wagners bought it from a craigslist ad in the summer of 2011.

“Friends of mine and I had been saying that we’ve got to get a Hokie bus for tailgating,” Steve recalls. “We thought, ‘What we need is an old RV, it just has to go two miles,’” figuring they would find a place to park in Blacksburg and drive to campus for tailgating.

The van was in good condition, so Wagner has only had to make a few repairs. The wheels – which are an unusual 16.5 inches in diameter – were rusty. He took them off, cleaned them with a grinder, then invested in new, heavy-duty, 8-ply tires. On the exterior, he added decals and magnets. Most of the improvements are inside – Hokie-themed door linings, a Hokie-themed curtain on the back window, exterior Hokie tracks and decals, replumbing copper water lines which had split. Eventually he will supplement the 8-track player with another sound system.

Wagner has been having fun with the van since the day he bought it. After bringing it home, he went to pick up
his daughter, Sierra. She was about to turn 16, and they had been car shopping. Turning into the home driveway, Steve told Sierra that he bought her a car. “Which car did you get? Black or tan interior?” she asked. When she saw the old, Hokie-modified Dodge van, she said: “I can’t believe you did that? Does Mom know?”

Steve said, “That’s your car. You get to drive it to school everyday.”

Sierra responded, “I’m so mad at you, when Mom divorces you, I’m not even going to help you pack when you have to move out!”

The Wagners have two other vintage cars, a 1966 Corvette and Lori’s first car - a 1978 Pontiac Trans Am. The Dodge Hokie van, though not the most valuable of that trio, is the most original, in the sense that you’d be hard pressed to find another one like it.

“Amazing is a good word for it,” Lori says of the van. “It takes my breath away. It did the first time I saw it and it still does.”

From the Original Sales Brochure

January 1975
Standard List
Price: $11,323

Some options:
Shag carpet: $40
AM/FM 8-track: $249
15 gallons of gas
at 55.9 cents/gal: $8.39

Steve and Lori Wagner

Once upon a time (1985 was the time) in a castle named Randolph Hall on the Virginia Tech campus, a prince (aka Steve Wagner) met and fell in love with his princess (Lori Wagner), and they are living happily ever after.

He graduated in 1983 with a chemical engineering degree and went to work in Richmond with AT&T. She stayed in town, determined to secure a master’s degree and Ph.D., also in chemical engineering. And she did, distinguishing herself as the first woman to do so. Diplomas in hand, she accepted a position at Allied Signal Corporation, now Honeywell International.

Married in 1985, the couple has remained steadfast in their dedication and commitment to their alma mater. They have both served as corporate liaisons and recruiters between their companies and Virginia Tech. Throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, together and individually, they traveled to Blacksburg for sports events, fundraisers and board and committee positions. As the family expanded with two daughters, Steve and Lori continued furthering the goals and success of the university they so dearly love. In the tradition of Ut Prosim (that I may serve), Lori was instrumental in founding the Chemical Engineering Alumni Advisory Board, while Steve served on the inaugural Engineering Education Advisory Board. In 2006, Lori was appointed by then Governor Tim Kaine to sit on the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors. And their service and loyalty endure, as both continue in advisory and support roles.

Their first daughter is in the class of 2014, and the younger one expects to become a Hokie next fall. Their oldest niece is a sophomore, and their godchild is a freshman. Hokie fever is contagious among the Wagners’ extended family and friends with 13 of them at the 2012 Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, and 18 attending the VT-Cincinnati game at FedEx Field in Maryland. It is the commitment of alumni like the Wagners – who own this Hokie Van – that makes Virginia Tech one very special school, Blacksburg one very special town and the New River Valley one very special region. Go Hokies!