

TREASURE HUNTER

Darrell Sheets, star of A&E's 'Storage Wars,' has become a familiar face in Lake Havasu City

By Buck Dopp

There's a new gambler in Lake Havasu City stalking estate sales and storage auctions. If you run into him, he'll ask if you have a "matterdaddy." When you reply, "What's a "matterdaddy?" He'll sternly proclaim, "I'm not your daddy!"

Or, if you see a guy at a garage sale who looks familiar and you dare to ask, "Where do I know you from?" He'll answer you loud enough for the people on the next block to hear. "I'm the cop who arrested you for drunk driving! How's your drinking problem?" Then he'll laugh as your face turns red.

If either of these things happens, you've encountered Darrell Sheets colorful reality star on A&E's *Storage Wars*. Nicknamed "The Gambler," Sheets has appeared in over 230 episodes since its premiere in 2010, the year he coined his catchphrase, "the wow factor."

Storage Wars is a show about wheel-dealers who, without opening boxes, bid on articles in abandoned storage lockers. Auction winners could get a container full of treasure or a unit filled with junk.

In Season 3, Sheets scored the biggest profit in the show's history. His winning bid of \$3,600 gave him ownership of original paintings by Francisco Goya, worth \$300,000, netting Sheets \$296,400.

"The paintings were priceless. I own 15 of them. I love art." There's more to the story. There were coins and other valuables in that locker which brought the total value to over a million dollars.

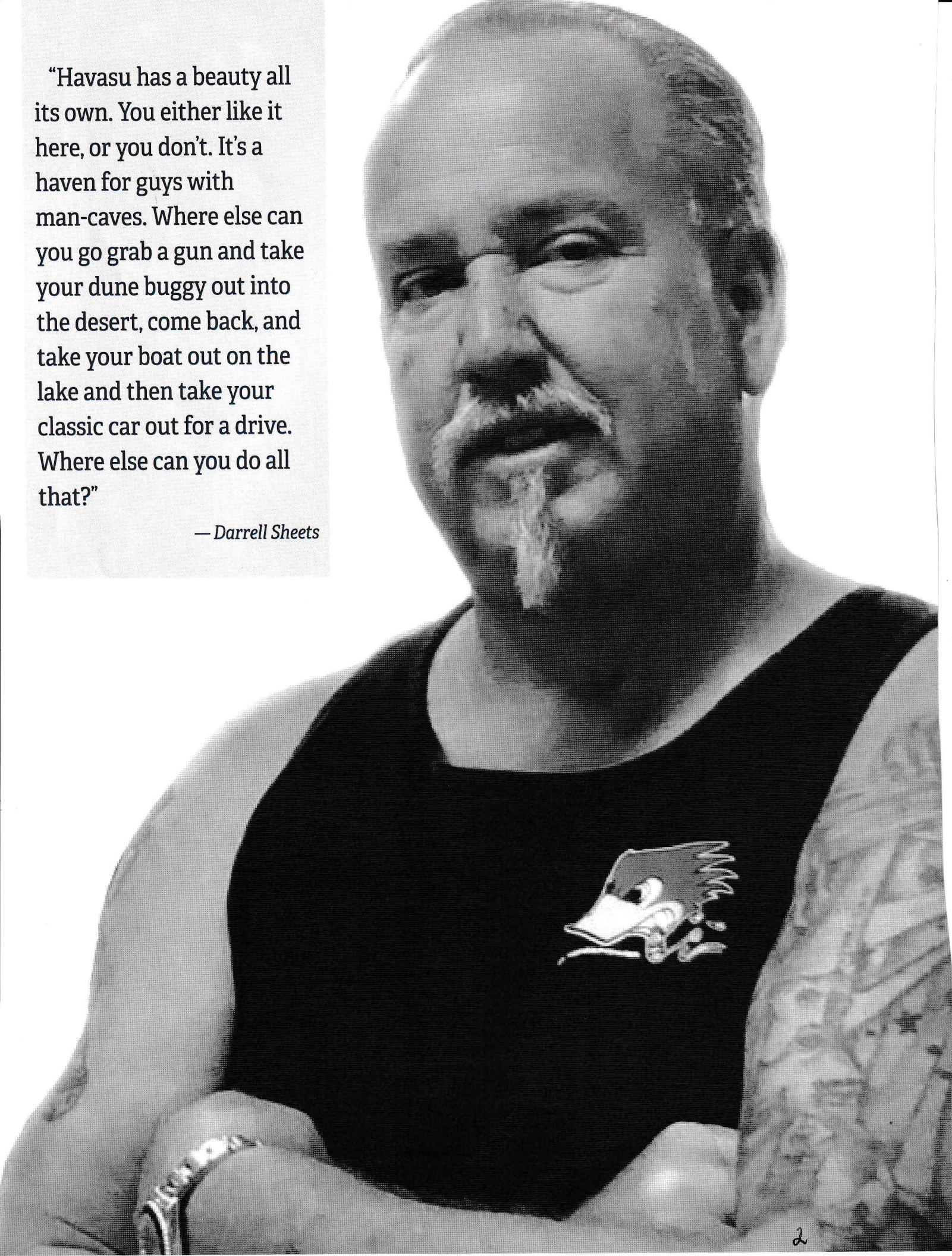
That's not the 61-year old's most valuable locker either. He outbid everyone on a comic book collection containing the first stories of Spider-Man in the *Amazing Fantasy* 15 episodes. It took seven pickup trucks to move the books. Sheets paid \$3,000 for the comics and attempted to sell the group back to its original owner, who was a homicide detective. The detective wouldn't buy it back at the asking price. Instead, he plotted to kidnap the Gambler's kids using his contacts from the criminal underworld.

In a hurry to get the comic book collection out of his hands, Sheets sold it for \$80,000, pocketing \$76,700. The guy he sold it to, resold it for \$800,000. Now, those comics are worth 5.4 million dollars. It's the third most valuable comic book collection in the world.

Brian Fountain worked on the production team of *Storage Wars* and became Sheets's best friend. "His nickname is the Gambler, but I don't think it's so much that he's a gambler," Fountain said. "Darrell really knows his stuff. He knows what he can buy and sell at a fair price."

“Havasu has a beauty all its own. You either like it here, or you don’t. It’s a haven for guys with man-caves. Where else can you go grab a gun and take your dune buggy out into the desert, come back, and take your boat out on the lake and then take your classic car out for a drive. Where else can you do all that?”

— Darrell Sheets





Although Fountain lives in Riverside, California, he bought a getaway home in Lake Havasu 13 years ago. He told his buddy about a duplex in the same neighborhood within walking distance of the lake. Darrell snapped up the duplex, renting out one side while living in the other, which he described as a “giant casita.”

Darrell and his 14-year old granddaughter Zoie Sheets moved permanently to the duplex during the last week of June. Zoie is a sophomore

at Lake Havasu High School. “I’ve had custody of her since day one,” he said, glowing with pride. If they were a father and daughter, they couldn’t be any closer.

He’s already bought many storage lockers in Lake Havasu and said the buying is good. “I’m taking all my earnings and investments and investing them here. I’ve bought a bunch of homes and some warehouses. I’m getting an 11% return on my investment. I can’t get that anywhere else. That’s why I’m in Havasu.”

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Sheets with his granddaughter, Zoie.

The native of Covina, California, enjoys meeting the snowbirds as well as the locals. "I felt I was going back to the 80s, which is pleasant. Havasu has a beauty all its own. You either like it here, or you don't. It's a haven for guys with man-caves," he noted. "Where else can you go grab a gun and take your dune buggy out into the desert, come back and take your boat out on the lake and then take your classic car out for a drive. Where else can you do all that?"

Although still a Storage Wars cast member, Sheets is taking a long break, and slowing his hectic lifestyle

to a healthier speed. On March 11, he had two heart attacks—a 95% blockage on one side and an 85% blockage on the other. "A heart attack will make you start slowing down," he said with a nod.

He's not going to be sitting around much. That's not in the trader's DNA. He's considering opening an auction house, an estate selling business or a "used and abused store," a term that spontaneously came out of his mouth, that made him smile after he said it. "Yeah. A used and abused store."

Former girlfriend Kimber Wuerfel introduced Darrell to the Lake Havasu area. She

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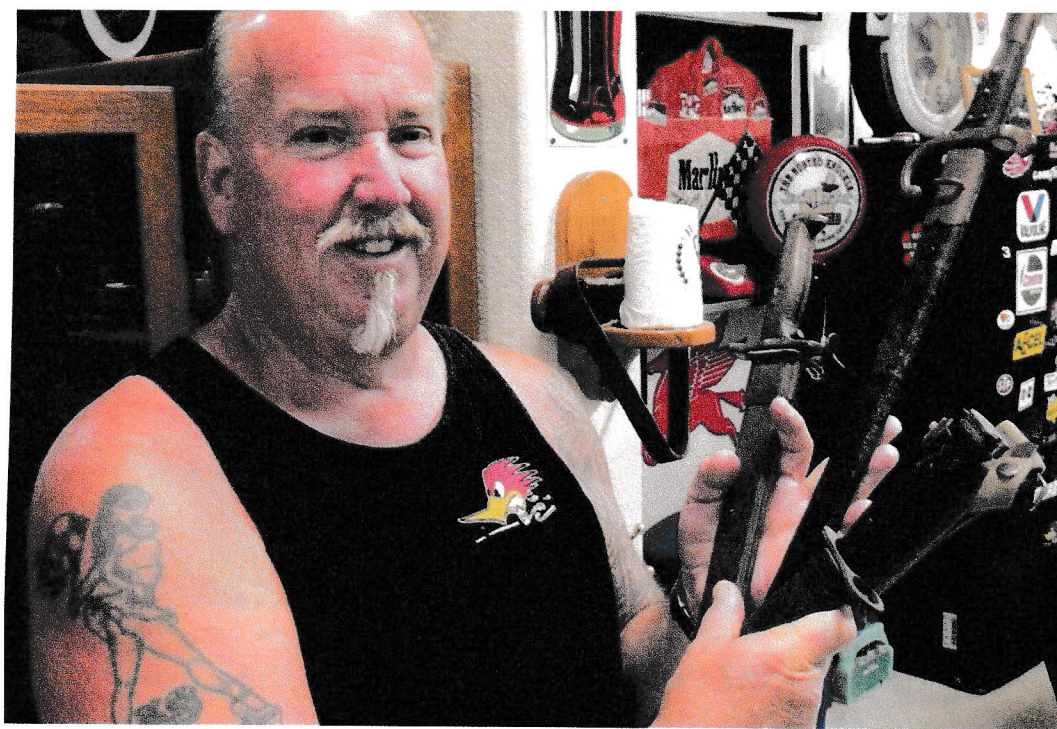
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"If he comes to your house be prepared for him to make offers on anything he thinks he can get you to sell to him."

—Lindley Diskin
friend of Darrell Sheets

Left: Sheets shows off his bayonet collection.

Below: An old sign in Sheets' garage plays his television image.

spent summer vacations on the Parker Strip competing and winning speed skiing championships.

"I admire the way Darrell puts Zoie first," Wuerfel said. "He's a self-educated man. He gets up in the morning and makes things happen. He's got a gigantic heart, and he's street smart." As for his "matterdaddy" joke, she said with a smile in her voice, "He needs to get some new material."

Kimber's sister, Lindley and her husband "Tijuana Tim" Diskin are big fans of Darrell Sheets. Lindley, who is the general sales manager for the River Rat Radio Group, said Darrell's voice is on the Shugrue's radio ads and the station IDs.

"We met Darrell when he was dating my sister Kimber years ago, and they broke up, but we couldn't stop being friends with the big guy because he's very loveable," Lindley said. "If he comes to your house be prepared for him to make offers on anything he thinks he can get you to sell him."

Her husband Tim agreed. "He came to our house one day and saw this metal doorstop. He told my wife, 'I'll give you \$50 for that.' She said, 'Your money's no good here. We won't take your money in exchange for that old doorstop.' Later, he told us it was worth \$500." Tim continued, "He'll go to garage sales and ask the people if they have jewelry or watches. The next thing you know, he's



inside their house making offers on their valuables."

On a recent morning, Darrell, Zoie and their Chihuahua-mixes, Sonny and Jeffy, were hanging out in his 3,800 sq. ft. man-cave garage. Clad in his work uniform consisting of a tank top, shorts and flip-flops, a style he describes as "comfortable," Darrell discussed his career and the secret to his success.

He spoke with a squeaky voice reminiscent of Andy Devine and humorous word choices that would outdo Yogi Berra. He's been known to coin catchphrases and invent new words. "I was born with this voice. I never smoked or drank. It's my natural voice," he explained. "My one-liners are not rehearsed. I don't

even know what I'm going to say before I say it."

Zoie wants people to know her grandfather isn't just a person on TV. "He's a real person. He's kind and caring." It's not uncommon for her to take 100 pictures when they go out. Once someone asks her to take a picture with her grandfather there's a snowball effect. Others recognize him and want her to take their photos, too. In most images, he points his finger at the person with him as if to say, "It's about you, not me."

"People hand their phones to Zoie. They can get a selfie?" a visitor asks.

"Ussies. There are two of them, so they're ussies," Darrell corrects. He and Zoie laugh. He's invented another word

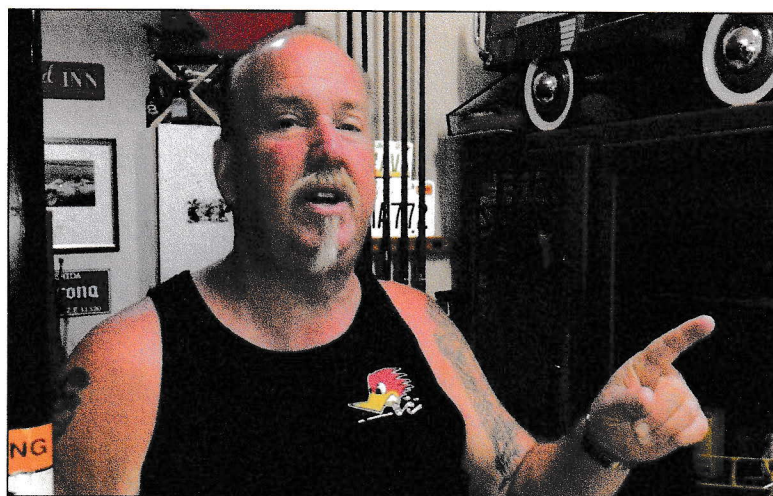
"Would you call yourself a storage hunter?"

He thinks for a few seconds, "No. I buy anything and everything that has value. I call myself more of a treasure hunter."

Zoie voices her approval of the term. "Yeah!"

"There is a misconception about storage auctions," Sheets said. "I'm not making money off of other people. Many are wealthy, like doctors and lawyers, who are on a long trip or moving overseas. They didn't leave a forwarding address."

Renters of storage units automatically pay their monthly storage fees using the auto-pay feature of credit cards and sometimes forget to leave a forwarding address on file. When the card number changes, the bill doesn't get paid, and there is no way to contact the renter. In California, after 90 days, the contents in a storage locker can be auctioned. Arizona laws



are similar. "I'm not hoarder. That's a whole different thing," he said. "Three times I've sold everything off. Not because I needed the money. I started to feel that [the collections] owned me instead of me owning them."

Sheets has had his share of tough times. In the late 80s, he went through a dark period in which he said he got arrogant.

"These guys popped into my life when I was down—Bruce Ashley, Brian Fountain and Chad Harris. Bruce and Chad were pastors. We called ourselves the Four Mouseketeers. Bruce was married with four kids, and yet he called me every night at 10 p.m. and we talked for an hour and a half."

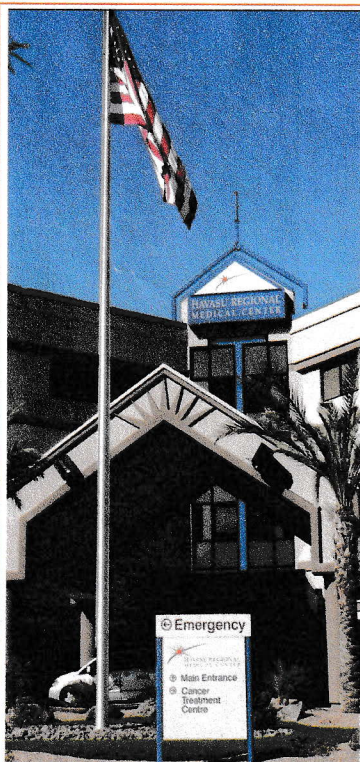
Brian Fountain remembers those days well. The four would

go out to dinner and then have a Bible study. "Darrell has told me that this saved his life. Thank God we all came out on top."

Darrell said the secret to success is hard work. "I'm doing special, but I'm a true, life-long hustler." It helps that he has a memory like an encyclopedia and a 40-year old Rolodex of contacts who can appraise anything he wants to sell.

Looking around at the collectibles in his home he said "It's better than money in the bank. I can enjoy them, and when I need money, I can sell them."

If you see, Darrell Sheets around Lake Havasu remember not to ask him, "what's your matterdaddy?" And whatever you do, don't ask, "Where do you know you from?" He just might answer something like, "I'm your doctor. How's your swollen prostate?" ☀



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