

## Weather Alert

### Flash Flood Watch until 7PM CDT WED

Home / News

[https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/wku-students-gaining-traction-with-spartan-x-business/article\\_66b0e4ed-79e6-5d79-aae0-eb5d0f7e9237.html](https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/wku-students-gaining-traction-with-spartan-x-business/article_66b0e4ed-79e6-5d79-aae0-eb5d0f7e9237.html)

## WKU students gaining traction with Spartan 4x4 business

By DON SERGENT [dsergent@bgdailynews.com](mailto:dsergent@bgdailynews.com) 38 min ago



Robert Bowden (from left) of Atlanta, Andrew Clark of Bowling Green and Hunter Lee of Utica, Ky., pose for a photo in their truck named “Leonidas” on Monday, June 25, 2018, at the WKU Small Business Development Center.

**Buy Now**

photos by Austin Anthony/[photo@bgdailynews.com](mailto:photo@bgdailynews.com)

It's hard to tell which is more attention-grabbing, the old Dodge farm truck transformed into an off-road monster called Leonidas or the trio of college students who did the transforming.

Leonidas – with its striking gray wrap and black lettering, custom lights, coilover shocks, 40-inch wheels and, of all things, race car seats – turned heads when it was unveiled this month at the Nashville Adrenaline Auto Show.

It's a chick magnet for sure, but that's not what these Western Kentucky University students had in mind when they bought the 2013 Dodge Ram from a Metcalfe County farmer and did an extreme makeover.

“We're building a foundation for our business,” said Robert Bowden, the 20-year-old founder and CEO of Spartan 4x4, who named his signature vehicle after a famous Spartan warrior king.

At an age when most young men aren't planning much beyond the next frat party, Bowden and partners Andrew Clark and Hunter Lee have launched a business catering to the off-road and custom vehicle craze.

Housed in a 600-square-foot office in WKU's Small Business Accelerator on Nashville Road, Spartan 4x4 is more than a trio of gearheads geeking over Power Stroke engines and heavy-duty suspensions. These guys have a plan.

“These kids have a lot of drive, and they know what they want,” said Chris Early of Bowling Green's S & K Powder Coating, which did some of the work on Leonidas. “They're definitely going places. They're great to work with. I'm looking forward to doing more work with them.”

The plan for the three partners is to tap into a growing segment of the automotive industry while also doing something they love. Berkshire Hathaway's BusinessWire said the all-terrain vehicle market is growing by 8 percent annually, and the growth curve for the type of custom work Spartan 4x4 is doing may be even steeper.

Specializing in what's called personal build consulting, Bowden, Clark and Lee are helping build custom off-road vehicles for clients who may want to do some stump-jumping on the weekends or may simply want a cool-looking truck or Jeep that turns heads when they're driving down the interstate.

"The off-road industry is getting so big," Bowden said. "A lot of people are turned off by the expense, but you don't have to buy the nicest truck from a dealer. Just put a little money into it and get creative. If you want to modify your truck or Jeep with after-market parts, we can help."

And they have.

Bowden started in personal build consulting while still a high school student in the Atlanta area, and he has done custom builds for such clients as Dr. Heavenly Kimes of the "Married to Medicine" TV show fame and rapper Big Boi Patton.

"You can be so unique," Bowden said of the custom builds. "People can express themselves through their vehicles. That's what we're all passionate about, and we get to build some really awesome vehicles."

It's a great fit for Bowden and his partners, all off-road enthusiasts.

"We've all been working on cars and turning wrenches since we were in high school," said Lee, Spartan 4x4's marketing manager. "People come to us with a vision for what they want. We take that end goal and break it down into steps, outlining what the customer likes and how much it costs. That gives us a platform to get started."

While those custom builds are the company's bread and butter, the business plan doesn't end there.

Working with manufacturers of after-market parts, Spartan 4x4 is able to leverage logo placement and other marketing strategies to keep costs down. The partners are branching out into their own brand of lights and other parts and even getting into Spartan 4x4-branded apparel.

Even the company name is part of that branding.

“This industry was built on rugged, off-road vehicles,” Bowden said. “We’re trying to bring the industry back to where it started, but with more of a sleek look to it. Our brand and the name Spartan reflects that.”

Bowden and his partners talk about business strategy, marketing and branding like business veterans, and Bowden’s father said that’s the truly unique aspect of this fledgling enterprise.



“They have the maturity of guys with 10 to 15 years of experience,” said Bert Bowden, who has acted as an adviser to his son and his partners.

The elder Bowden credits the WKU Small Business Accelerator for helping his son, who is working on a degree in entrepreneurship.

“I’m thrilled that he’s made that connection through WKU and the business school,” Bert Bowden said. “I can’t imagine him doing what he’s doing while still a student at any other school. They’ve been so supportive and helped him make the right steps. It’s a perfect fit.”

Jeff Hook, director of the WKU Small Business Accelerator, said Robert Bowden “sort of breaks the stereotype” of the millennial generation.

“What stands out to me is his professionalism, drive and passion,” Hook said. “Robert demonstrates that he understands what he does know and understands what he doesn’t know. He looks for ways to grasp those things he doesn’t know.”

Including how business networking can enhance Spartan 4x4.

Robert Bowden, looking for those networking opportunities, has joined the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce and is already a member of the chamber’s motorsports steering committee that was formed to help grow the motorsports sector of the local economy.

“From our first meeting with Robert and his team at Spartan 4x4, we were impressed with his knowledge and passion for growth,” said Ron Bunch, president and CEO of the Bowling Green chamber. “We are confident in their increasing success and contribution to our motorsports sector in Bowling Green.”

Bowden and his partners are already looking to build on the buzz they created with Leonidas at the Nashville show and are planning to attend the Specialty Equipment Market Association show in Las Vegas this fall to make more contacts.

“It’s going to be fun to see where this leads,” Bert Bowden said.

**Don Sergent**