

# Beecher native caters for Newman/Haas Racing

by Cora Weisenberger

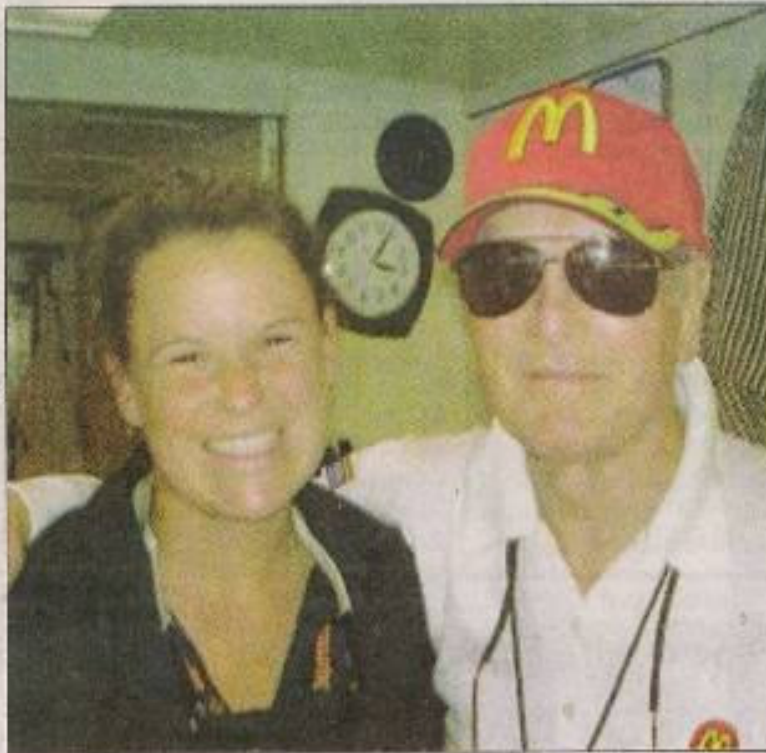
Laura Cooper never thought she have a job as a cook.

"I never in my life worked in a kitchen," said the 28-year-old Beecher native. "When I told friends what I was going to do, they said, 'What are you getting yourself into?'"

Then again, Cooper doesn't work in any ordinary kitchen. Her kitchen is located in Indianapolis, Ind.; Monterey, Mexico; Toronto, Canada and wherever else the racing circuit takes her. Cooper is a catering assistant for the Newman/Haas Racing Team. "Newman" as in movie star Paul Newman.

Grease is in Cooper's blood but it runs more along the automotive lines than the culinary. Her father owned an auto parts store and her brother is a mechanic for the David Letterman/Bobby Rahal racing team.

While Cooper was studying sports and tourism management at the University of Illinois in Champaign she spent summers tending bar in Elkhart Lake, Wis. Home to the longest road course in North America, Elkhart Lake is a watering hole for gear heads. Among them were Peter and Mary-Lin Murphy who operate the hospitality unit for the



**BEECHER NATIVE** Laura Cooper poses with movie star Paul Newman. Cooper is a catering assistant for the Newman/Haas Racing Team.

- photo courtesy of Laura Cooper

Newman Haas team. In 2001, Cooper said she had graduated from college and didn't know what she would do next. Then she learned the Murphys were looking to add someone to their staff. Interested in racing and wanting to travel, it seemed like

the perfect job.

"So I lied and said I could cook," she said.

Cooper and another hospitality team member flies to the track on the Monday before the race; the Murphys drive a \$1.2 million coach. They prepare the coach,

set up furniture, shop for groceries and start prepping food. The race team - including Paul Newman himself - flies in late on Thursday. The hospitality tent is open to the racing team, the pit crew and guests. Cooper said the hospitality team cooks for an average of 100 people per meal; she and Mary-Lin Murphy do all the cooking.

"She taught me everything I know (about cooking)," Cooper said.

Drivers need lots of energy for the race so they get special meals that are high in carbohydrates. The rest of the crew and their guests get food that Cooper called "American fare," such as sirloin steaks and plenty of selections from Newman's line of food products.

Meeting celebrities is one of the perks of working on the hospitality crew. Cooper said she has met Tom Cruise, Bruce Willis and Sir Paul McCartney. She said her introduction to Newman came in a memorable way during her first race.

The team was in Monterey, Mexico when the word came that the helicopter bringing the actor

See **NEWMAN** page 3

Week of Thursday, August 17, 2006

R

## Newman

continued from page 1

to the track could not land at its original destination because of a crack in the helipad. The chopper was rerouted but no one on the Newman team knew where. Fortunately, Cooper had seen another helipad while she was grocery shopping. Team members hopped in a vehicle and, guided only by Cooper's vague recollection of the helipad location, they rushed off to collect the movie star. They were just a few steps ahead of the TV camera crews who were also trying to find Newman's arrival site. Finding the helipad, Cooper said the owner of the most famous blue eyes in movies rushed off of the helicopter, gave her a hug and said, "Welcome to the team."

Newman, frequently accompanied by his wife, Joanne Woodward, attends every race and spends the entire weekend. Cooper called the movie star a "normal guy but with a quirky sense of humor."

"He's probably the most generous guy," she said.

His generosity included sending Cooper to New York City for the premiere of "Road to Perdition," the movie starring Newman and Tom Hanks that was shot in and around Beecher. Cooper said Newman kept leaving the red carpet where the other celebrities congregated and mingling with the "nobodies."

In spite of the travel and the brushes with celebrities, Cooper said this might be her last year on the hospitality crew. Since it is cost prohibitive to send the crew to races overseas she works only eight or nine races a year and she wants a full-time job. Now living in Elkhart Lake, she has an event planning company called Cooper Consulting. She said she would like to remain in auto racing, perhaps in client relations where she would work with team sponsors.

Even so, Cooper said it would be hard for her to leave racing and the hospitality team.

"The team is like family," she said. "One huge family on the road."