

Sold!

Waukesha County
is home to the Channel
10 Auction Artists



Rain Gardens

Learn how your yard can
soak up excess runoff

An American Classic

Al Wagner drove himself into his
dream job as a Corvette designer page 82





Al Wagner stands amongst several of his toys including (front) a 1988B Anniversary Royal King, a 1967 Corvette Roadster and a 1962 Spool Wheeler Corvette (right). A 1971 C3 Corvette is parked in the garage.

An American Classic

Al Wagner drove himself into his dream job as a Corvette and Harley-Davidson designer

Al Wagner has finally decided what he wants to be when he grows up. At the age of 46 some may say it's about time! But for Wagner, it's been a magical and successful road toward his dream. This month he is opening An American Classic in Delafield, a classic vehicle restoration and customization business. It couldn't be a more perfect fit for the Delafield resident, whose resume would make any car aficionado drool.

Some of the vehicles you may own originated in Al Wagner's ingenious mind. By the time he was 29, his business card read "Corvette Designer" for General Motors Corp. (GM). A decade later, he was head of the Dynaglide platform for Harley-Davidson.

It seems that Wagner has always been on a mission and the word "no" is not in his vocabulary.

Driven would be an understatement when it comes to explaining his personality. "When I was 12 years old I told everyone in my neighborhood that I was going to go design Corvettes," he says with a smile. Little did they know he was serious.

In those days, Saturday mornings were spent tinkering in the garage with his father. "My dad was a car nut and being from Europe, his passion was for foreign cars," Wagner says. But Wagner's heart belonged elsewhere. "I loved Corvettes when I saw them," he says.

Wagner graduated from Don Bosco Prep in New Jersey. "My parents could see that I was talented mathematically," Wagner says. Something else they saw was a fire that drove him to succeed. "When I decided I wanted to do something, I looked into it and did it."

He set his eyes on West Point Military Academy for his post high school education. The West Point application process was grueling, involving many applicants and only four open slots for incoming freshmen. Applicants had to go through a series of interviews and were cut along the way. Wagner made it to the final interview which took place in front of a large panel of military personnel. It was rather intimidating for a teenager and Wagner didn't make the final cut. He was selected as the third

alternate from his state. "It was a dramatic experience. I didn't get in so I had to switch gears," he says.

He talked to his best friend, who was going to Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). He called the school to enroll just two weeks before classes began. He convinced admissions to add him to the freshman roster.

Shortly after he was accepted at RIT, West Point called and informed him they had an open spot. Wagner turned it down. "When you cut bait and move on, you can't look back," he says.

Reflecting on that period of his life, Wagner knew he had made the right decision. "I never would have made it through West Point, I'm too headstrong. There was a reason that was not fulfilled."

The ease with how he made this life-changing decision is a testament to Wagner's character.

He also paid for his entire college education by saving money over the years from his paper route. "My parents taught us from early on that if you want it you go earn it."

One thing he knew for sure was that he wanted a career involving cars. "I knew I always wanted to work at General Motors," he says.

You have to be open to step into the doors of GM, but that didn't deter Wagner.

One day between classes at RIT he noticed a sheet of paper hanging on a bulletin board announcing internship opportunities at GM. Wagner eagerly looked at the date for the interviews and winced when he saw they were starting in 45 minutes. With no time to go home and change, he signed up for an interview slot wearing his blue jeans, flannel shirt and work boots. Everyone else was in three-piece suits.

The job was in the foundry division. His interview went well and he was hired on the spot. The GM representative said he knew the moment Wagner walked through the door he would hire him because at a foundry, no one wears suits.

"I absolutely loved working in the foundry. This was guy stuff!" Wagner exclaims. "I was being seceded to take over the foundry, but I didn't know it at the time."

Meanwhile the gears were turning, as Wagner contemplated how he was going to work his way into the design division for GM. After two years at the foundry, he went home for Thanksgiving and decided he was going to apply at the assembly plant in Terrytown, N.Y. Wagner showed up at the gate with resume in hand, but was not allowed into the plant. Instead of turning away disappointed, he sat and talked to the security guard, telling him about his life's ambitions. Wagner didn't know it at the time, but he was having his initial interview. The security guard had been at the plant for decades and was well regarded by management. He liked Wagner and after he left, marched his resume over to the office and said they should hire him. He got the job.

"You have to be determined. You have to go and make things happen. That's how I have lived my life," he says enthusiastically. Wagner had a plan while working for the GM corporation. "I was learning all the different parts of the cars."

He graduated from college and was offered a job as the plant maintenance supervisor, but he was skeptical. "My dad gave me the best advice of my life. He said they're offering you the hard

est job in the plant and you are not recognizing it." He told me I needed to work with people and learn how to accomplish tasks. "It was very key to my success, to work on the ground level and learn how people want to get their job done and get it right."

It was the early 1980s when Wagner moved from plant maintenance to running the paint shop. At that time computer technology was coming to the forefront in the business world. GM began talking about using robotics to paint cars on the assembly line.

He moved to Detroit where he was on the ground floor of implementing the robotic technology to paint the vehicles. Wagner not only developed cutting edge technology, he also developed a relationship with his future wife, Susan.

He met Susan during a happy hour at a local watering hole. Susan was also very career oriented, working her way up the corporate ladder at a software company. Although she too was driven, she marveled at Wagner's determination.

"At first it was overwhelming. He has a very strong personality. Susan says with a smile, "He was unlike anyone else I've ever met. You could tell he was going places." The couple married in 1990.

A year before they were married, Wagner's career goal was coming within reach.

He was invited to a crab dinner at a Maryland restaurant with members of GM's upper management. Given the opportunity to

talk with big wigs about his aspirations turned into the ticket to his dream job on the design team.

They sent him to "Advanced Vehicle Engineering" for the first year, which was a "think tank" for future automotive design. "There was a lot of neat inventions that came to the surface, but the business world was not ready to accept it. I saw stuff there that blew my mind." Although he can't go into specifics, Wagner said one example was an engine made out of plastic that ran on gasoline. "It was so light, you could pick it up with one hand. A lot of the engine parts seen today are made out of the same technology," says Wagner.

Because rear collisions are one of the highest causes of accidents, another project the group worked on was a brake sensor unit that was installed in front of the vehicle that could sense an oncoming vehicle or object in front of the car and would automatically stop the car without the driver having to apply the brakes.

Wagner and other "think tank" members also came up with the idea of painted body panels right out of the mold so the parts did not require painting later during the assembly process.

In 1989, he became a body engineer on the design team where he also met Earl Werner, the vehicle and assembly chief engineer for Corvette.

"I thought I died and went to heaven," he beams. At the time the team was creating the ZR1 which was considered the fastest sports car in the world.

While on the Corvette design team, he had the opportunity to work with some Corvette icons including Zora Duntov, Dave McLellan and Larry Shinoda. He also worked with several celebrities including race car driver Rick Mears in the early 1990s.

"I designed his Corvette with Larry Shinoda. At the time it

Corvettes & Animals

Corvette Designer Larry Shinoda

integrated animals into his design work which is apparent through the Corvette body styles he created. "The Japanese are really into nature and are one with the animals," Wagner explains.

•The Stingray line from 1961-67 was designed to resemble a Stingray animal.

•The C3 series was designed after the mako shark. The gills on the side of the car resemble gills on a fish. The hood appears to be a long snout on the front of the car.

was no big deal," Wagner says. Shinoda was THE designer for Corvette. He is considered a legend and is responsible for designing the Stingray series from 1963 to 1967 and the Mako Shark prototype series starting in 1968. He was also a key figure in the design of the Corvair Monza, the Z-28 Camaro and the Boss 302 Mustang.

Shinoda was Wagner's mentor, as well as his friend. "We became such good friends that Larry was at my bachelor party," Wagner says.

The kid from New Jersey had finally made it, but then again, he was sure he always would. "If you drive toward your goal

and you keep your mind on it, then it becomes a fulfilling prophecy," he says. "I felt very complete. I was at the pinnacle at such a young age." And young he was, for Wagner was less than 30 when he had his coveted job title.

In 1993, he won the Plastics of the Year award. At a time when recycling was the new craze, Wagner had figured out how to recycle Corvette fiberglass bodies into future Corvettes.

In 1994, he was head of the team that was developing the convertible ZR1, a car that never hit the production line because GM was cutting back. The company had entered a bad streak and in the early 1990s upper management decided to discontinue the Corvette line. The decision lasted only four days and GM never went public with it. "You go to the euphoria of being a Corvette engineer to the line being canceled. They were told to roll up all the drawings and archive them." The head of Chevrolet, Jim Perkins, diverted \$750,000 from the marketing budget to the engineering department to keep the line going.

But Wagner's world was going to continue to change. Earl Werner, who Wagner considered another mentor, was in line to become the next chief engineer for Corvette. Instead, Werner opted to leave GM and took a job at Harley-Davidson as vice president of product development.

He suggested that Wagner leave the Corvette team and move over to the GM truck line. Wagner was shocked, but Werner explained that the Corvette design team was no longer going to work as a group, and he knew Wagner would not enjoy the new system.

The truck design team still worked together. "That was big for me to be part of a team," Wagner says. He made the switch and while wearing the truck design team cap, Wagner was in charge of redesigning the Chevrolet Tahoe and GMC Yukon trucks during the mid 1990s.

In 1997, his life would change again. "I was ready to get a big

promotion at GM because I had been given the Motor Trend Truck of the Year Award," he says. "To achieve Motor Trend Car or Truck of the Year was a big deal."

Shortly after his award, he designed the Denali SUV, but that would be the last vehicle he would design for GM.

On a trip to the Janesville plant, he stopped in Milwaukee to visit Werner. His mentor looked at him during dinner and told him it was finally time. Wagner was confused. "Time for what?" Werner simply replied, "It's time to come to Harley-Davidson." As soon as Wagner had laid carpeting down in the new addition of his Detroit home, the For Sale sign went up in the front

yard. "He (Werner) always had great advice for me. He was always one step ahead," Wagner says.

Werner needed someone to redesign the product development process with him at Harley-Davidson and he knew Wagner would be perfect.

"That was a big decision to move. He had been at GM for a long time," Susan says.

Wagner took off his suit and put on his leather jacket. He came to Harley-Davidson and was in charge of the Dyna motorcycle platform. Harley-Davidson has four platforms consisting of Dyna, Sportster, Soft Tail and Touring FL.

"It was challenging coming from the outside into a very close-knit family and making major changes," he says. But he enjoyed it tremendously.


"Working side by side with Willie G. from the drawing board to actually making the bike was just fabulous," he says. "The vision of all the bikes comes from Willie G."

Wagner worked for Harley-Davidson for eight years. "It was a lot of work and a lot of travel," he says. The design

team would attend the big rallies such as Daytona and Sturgis with Willie G. They would put on riding gear, split up and mix amongst the crowd. Fellow bikers would have no idea who was sitting next to them at the bar, but it may have been one of the designers, listening for feedback on the good and bad aspects of bike design. The team would then reconvene and discuss what they heard.

In 2004 he said goodbye to Harley-Davidson. "I left to go full fill the next big dream," he says. And that dream is An American Classic. "I always did restoration on Corvettes as a hobby," he says. He said restoration is a different feeling than design work. "In design you don't see the fruits of your labor until you walk down the line. I craved something that could give me more instant gratification," he says.

He purchased a 100-year-old building in Delafield that was once a car dealer decades ago. "The fit was perfect," he says.

No doubt it will be if it's an AI Wagner vision. 

"You have to be determined. You have to go and make things happen. That's how I have lived my life." *Al Wagner*



Larry Shinoda posed with Al during an event. Shinoda was one of Al's mentors as well as his friend.