

Member Spotlight

Denny LaBantschnig

By Monica Ledwon

This month's Gazette features Denny Labantschnig, a new member who is such a true blue car nut his email address is "dennythecarguy". He has been around cars in both professional paths as well as pastime hobbies his entire life.

Born and raised in the city of St. Louis, Denny's first recollection of the beauty of the automobile came from his family's '51 Buick Special. His father was a gearhead and Denny grew up by his side buying project cars, working mechanical wonders to get them on the road again and then flipping the vehicles for a profit. As an eight-year-old, Denny was his father's assistant in toting parts and tools and learning the basics. He has fond memories in their tiny garage and had no knowledge that his family was really poor and needed the extra money these cars generated. Usually, they flipped five cars a year renting neighbors' garages for short times for storage. This part time family gig included an array of fine cars that caught Denny's eye such as Lincoln Zephyrs, Ford Sun Liners and Buick Skylarks.



Denny and Susan LaBantschnig holding the Buick sign that he has had since his younger days and standing in front to their prestigious "Dearborn Award" 1940 Ford Panel truck and a 1939 Packard.

Denny's interest in cars was sharpened as he peddled his bike down Kingshighway studying styles and designs. He would often pull over into the various dealerships along the road and check out the new models. The salesmen, of course, were quite welcoming and gave him a yearly promo car model. Being a saver, Denny still has his collection of 50 company brand models today.

When turning 16, his family moved into St. Louis County and Denny graduated from Lindberg High School. His dad was doing well in a paper plant job moving up to a manager position. So, he bought Denny a timeless classic, the 1955 Corvette convertible for his high school graduation, but didn't quite turn it over to him. Denny still owns it today and remembers competing with his dad over who gets to drive it and when.

His dad added a 1965 Buick Riviera to their motor pool. When shopping for this car at Burns Buick, Denny spied on the showroom floor, a GS 4 speed stick convertible and was smitten. After several months, of return trips to the dealership and seeing this car not move, a salesman approached Denny and worked out a deal that he could afford a nominal car payment with his afterschool grocery store job. This was his first new car and it was a Buick.

Denny went on to Washington University earning a business degree and then later, an engineering degree from the GM Institute, a consortium of Michigan State University. Using these degrees, he worked in various career fields in various places in the states spending many years at Bell Telephone.

Around 1989, though, Denny wanted to change course. He began buying gas station/convenience store properties, building them up and then selling for a profit. To him, this was challenging fun. Ever the entrepreneur, Denny next bought a Ford/Lincoln/Mercury dealership in Rolla, Missouri. And he enjoyed running it for 25 years. In 2009, he won Ford's national Dealer Salute Award for his outstanding business and charitable endeavors.

But in 2014, selling the dealership and striking out on his own beckoned his attention. Denny started his own automotive consulting business, traveling far and wide nationally to assist other dealerships in improving their businesses. He set up a home in South county and constructed an 8300 sq.ft. garage adjacent to the house to store his current collectibles, mostly unique Ford and GM models numbering up to 12. Some are his father's long cherished cars that he has kept in his fold. Denny even owns a 2005 Ford GT 40 to hot rod around in. And he and his wife, Susan, drive twin retro Ford Thunderbird ragtops. But no Buick lives there.

As time permitted, he admired cars at various shows here in St. Louis. He dreamed of the '65 GS he once had owned as a young man and regretted parting with it. Denny decided to set a goal to find a '65 Riviera model again.

In 2017 at a very chilly HCCA Easter Show, he met Kristina Richards and she signed him up into the Gateway Buick Chapter. Denny looked forward to the help and advice on his hunt for the sought after '65 Buick from our club. He also joined the Riviera Club, and the BCA.

Once, for an adventure, Denny applied to the Ford Motor Company to be accepted to make an application to purchase a 2016 halo vehicle, the new Ford GT. Though he complied with intense paperwork and a professional video of his deluxe garage and his cars' comfort factor within, he was turned down by Ford. Denny speculates that "I guess I can't compete with the like of Jay Leno and Bill Gates"!

Denny's final note to himself is that he wants to slow down his pace and do some fun stuff with the Gateway Chapter, attend local events and meetings. He is still on the hunt for that elusive '65 Riv.



Auburn 4 door Sedan and a Model T Roadster



1955 Corvette with the first 265 CID V8 mated to a Powerglide transmission. Far from the performance Corvettes of today.



Its OK Mom, I'll be home before curfew!

