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# THE Journal

## Medical Association of Georgia

## Stethoscopes, Wrenching and the Art of Restoration

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By Michael Balk, MD, FACC

We downsized our home recently, and while I expected the process to be stressful, I didn't anticipate how cleansing it would feel. Sorting through decades of photos and documents forced me to reflect on my life.

Among the boxes, I discovered a yellowing list I'd written in July 1981, shortly after my 20th birthday: *Cars I'd Like to Own*. Like an EPIC BPA popping up on the screen, the list forced me to recognize how deeply cars have defined my life over the past four decades.

The journey began in 1974, when my father asked me to help replace the coolant in his Buick. While he may have wanted some help, he really was trying to cement a good relationship with his rebellious teenage son. He turned the draincock the wrong way, snapped it off, and flooded the garage floor. The Buick went to the shop, but that single event ignited my journey of restoring cars and motorcycles.

In high school, I was the oddball who thrived in both shop class and AP calculus. I learned welding, machining

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parts were always available, and working on her on the weekends became my hobby. Like metastatic cancer, left unmitigated rust continued to grow and spread and I eventually let her go to pasture, but she taught me lessons on commitment, patience and inevitability.

By 2006, I had a four-post lift in my garage and a “business model” for my hobby. I’d rescue neglected cars, restore them, enjoy them for a few years and sell them. The profit was small and an unintended consequence but provided some justification.

I was drawn to vehicles with files of service records, stories and patina. Cars, no matter where they’re built, run on the same essentials: fuel, air and spark. Once you learn the idiosyncrasies of each manufacturer, the general concepts of repair are the same.



Among the highlights:

- My **1960 Mercedes 190SL** was purchased new by Dottie in Southern California. After her passing, her kids struggled to sell, but months later they decided I was the right caretaker. She had every service record since 1960. When the clutch failed, I pulled the transmission out and – using manuals, online

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valvetrain, she ran great. I should have kept her.

- **A barn-find 1973 Mercedes 450SL**, complete with a lifetime of yellow shop receipts, purchased from the estate of the original owner in Atlanta. Old Mercedes are the best-built cars in the world, and with minimal work on the fuel and ignition systems she remains a reliable performer today.
- **A 1967 Ferrari 330 GT** with racing pedigree and a logbook documenting every repair. The Ferrari tested my ingenuity. Parts were scarce and costs astronomical. Rebuilding the master cylinder required me to find a seal made and sold by only one manufacturer. I once fabricated a door component from \$8 of scrap metal, dodging the dreaded "Ferrari tax."

Sourcing parts before the internet was a real challenge and often involved snail mail, phone calls and waiting. There were no online parts suppliers. It's far easier now to find parts for my cars. These machines reward patience, creativity and a willingness to learn – useful skills in my medical practice, too.

I share a warehouse with a group of fellow enthusiasts we call Apex. More than a storage space, it's a clubhouse – where we trade advice, share meals and drive caravan-style to shows. One evening over smoky old-fashioned, we impulsively bid on a misrepresented 1967 Renault Dauphine on an auction site. My friend Steve, an eager but mechanical novice, won it, and together we coaxed "Smokey" back to life.

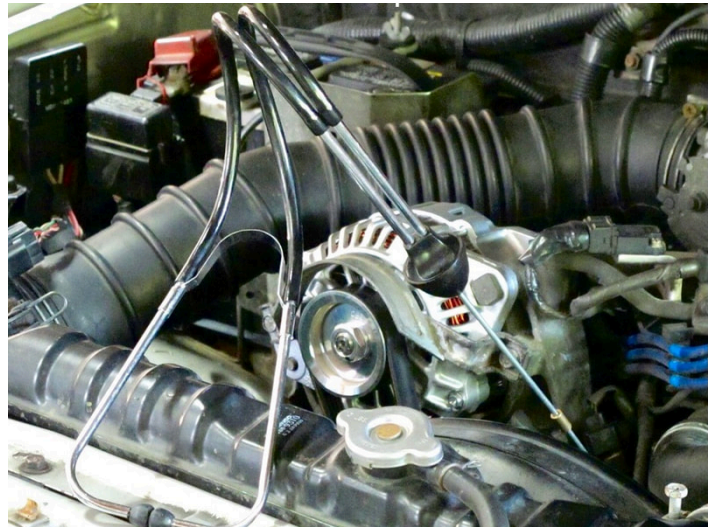
Turns out I not only like fixing things, I also like teaching people how to fix things. It reminds me of mentoring medical students – watching confidence bloom through hands-on experience.

Mechanics listen to sounds, runs diagnostics and inspect components before touching a wrench. Physicians run tests, uses imaging and examine the patient before making an incision. Both fields require continuous learning.

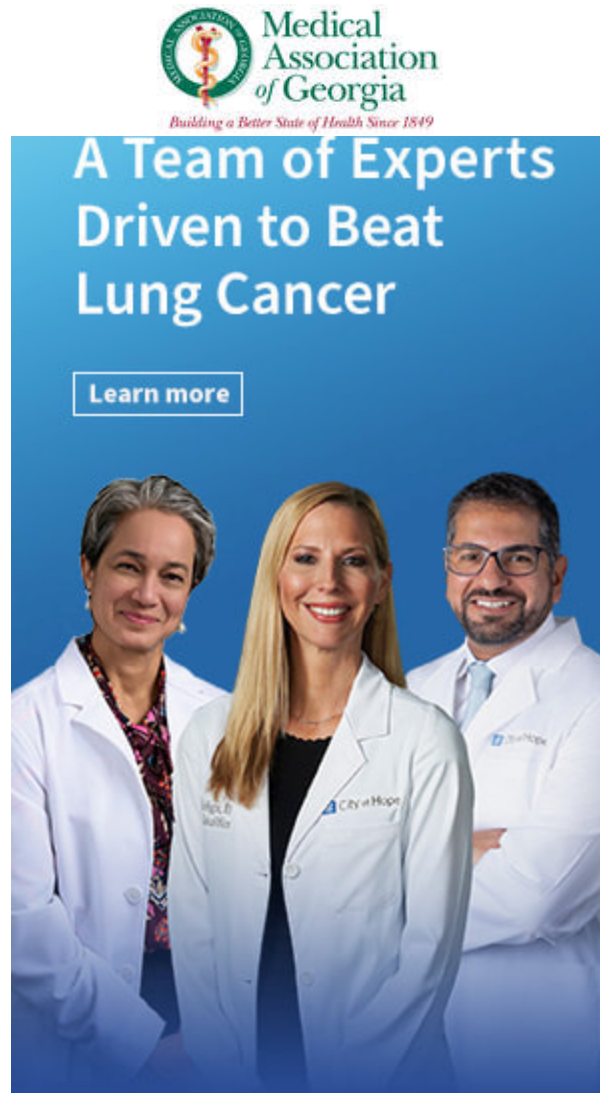
My old car hobby has been incredibly satisfying and has anchored me through decades of changes in medicine – electronic records, shifting ownership models, reimbursement battles. As I approach the final stage of my career. I'm not entirely sure what retirement is going to look like, but I'm confident it's going to involve fixing things, teaching people how to fix things, and buying and selling old cars. It will mean more time to fix, to teach and to keep the stories alive – one machine at a time. Even some of the tools are the same!



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