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## Her Corvette Story      By Jeff Bernhardt

This is a little different twist to the "Featured Car" segment of the Vette Gazette, in that it is certainly about a Corvette owned by a member of the club, but it is more of a story about how she came to own it, as told by member Jeff Bernhardt.

My wife Karren and I have basically been together since the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and to say that she knows me pretty well is definitely an understatement. She knew from a very young age that I picked from a gene pool that had a strong predilection to the automotive arts, the four-wheeled fire-breathing rubber burning chariots that twist pavement and command attention at the local Burger Barn with open headers and lumpy cams.

How some people can think of these engineering marvels as simple transportation is beyond me. Karren knew early on that I'm the kind of guy that doesn't mind dirt on his clothes and grease under his fingernails. It'll wash.

When we dated in high school, my cars were always tuned, washed and waxed before we went out - sometimes delaying our date. If it rained that weekend, they got washed and waxed after the rain - again. We went off to college together to become edjumas, and I parked my muscle car and drove a beater to school - a '67 Renault R10 that Karren's dad had given to me. It was a car that was left in his gas station lot that the bill wasn't paid on. The deal was, if I could get the title from the owner and get it running, I could have it. I got the title, installed a timing chain and drove it up to school. Since Karren's dad was in the gas station business, she was used to the smell of grease -

something that certainly helped my case.

Anyway, Karren accepted me as I am, agreed to be my wife,

raised two wonderful daughters with me and stood by me while I made a career for myself with a wrench in one hand and a paint gun in the

other. It's funny how things work out, but we bought the gas station from Karren's mom after her dad passed, which was something we later found out was what he had in mind all along. My typical day was spent at the station during the day, and in my garage at night. When my day came to an end, I would turn out the lights and walk out the door of my garage around 5am and greet my neighbor next door as he was walking out his back door to go to his garage. I'd go in and get around 4 hours of sleep and start the cycle all over again.

Karren stood by me as a Corvette widow while I worked on cars at the station all day and restored them in my garage at night. She would see me bring hulks of broken fiberglass piled on incomplete chassis' into the garage, pull the door down, and drive out a finished Corvette 6 months later. This process went on and on until I bought a '61 silver on red 230 horse 4-speed that really caught her eye. I told her when this car is finished, it'll be her car. It didn't work out that way because with our

Continued on page 2

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## Her Corvette Story (con't) By Jeff Bernhardt

Continued from page 1

family expenses, I needed the money from the sale of that car to keep the restoration process going. Understanding and always forgiving as my wife is, it was no big deal to her, but it never set well with me.

Fast forward to 25 years of marriage, the kids are a little older, finances are (a little) better, I'm no longer in the gas station business, but the Corvette restoration business. Karren has been the ever-patient wife, always supportive and never complaining - is always happy as long as I'm happy, and has never had a Corvette to call her own. Our 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary is coming up in December, and I think the 25<sup>th</sup> is a milestone - pretty important from what I'm told. At least by all the women. Guys put it right up there with a free bag of fertilizer when you buy three, but the women think it's pretty big. I'm driving a '92 Corvette coupe as a daily driver, with a '75 Top Flight convertible in the garage that's for sale. I have two Corvettes and Karren has none. Doesn't seem right. Now, somebody somewhere has labeled the 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary as the Silver anniversary. I don't

know why they did or when it started, but I'm usually one to play by the rules. The one Corvette that I ever owned that really caught Karren's eye was the '61 silver with red interior. Silver car, Silver anniversary. I think I'm seeing a pattern here. I've got an idea. The '75 in the garage is silver - hey, that might work.

Well, two things won't work about that logic. One: Handing your spouse the keys to a car you've owned and calling it an anniversary gift would go down in the family annals as the tackiest thing you could ever have done, making you the butt of the joke brought up at every family event and rehashed for generations to come. I'm already trying to live down the Mother's day gift of a Sears wood chipper I had given her one year. Ask her about it. Two: It was the red interior with the silver paint on the '61 that made it so special, not black like the '75 has. Dang. Well, I'm on a quest.

Again, it's funny how things work out, as the '75 sold just weeks before our anniversary to a guy in California. I've got a little mad money plus the cash from the sale of the '75, so now I'm ready to go shopping for

the car for her. I've had time to really think this through, and the best Corvette for Karren is one that she can get in, turn the key, put it in Drive and go. I don't want her to have to worry about setting the choke or flooding it, so it needs to be fuel injected. If it's hot out, she can turn on the AC and be comfortable. She's a convertible gal, so the top needs to come down. And, it needs to be silver with a red interior. It also should be one that washes itself, but they haven't invented that one yet. I just sold a '75, so it can't be a million dollars either. Plug all this into your search engine and see what you come up with.

For me, the answer was a silver '96 LT-1 automatic Collector Edition convertible with torch red interior.



One small hitch: They only made 73 of them with the torch red interior. Rut roh. A persistent internet search netted just two for sale in

Continued on page 3

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## Her Corvette Story (con't)      By Jeff Bernhardt

Continued from page 2

the weeks before our anniversary. One in Arizona, and one in.....Columbus Ohio! Corvette dealers have both of them, and it turns out that the owner in Columbus is selling a one-owner car that belonged to his accountant, and was bought new in Indianapolis. I drove my rollback up to Columbus the same day, and was immediately impressed with the test drive of this car, as well as the level of detail. I made the deal and loaded it up. As I'm hauling this car home, I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to do with it before

our anniversary. It's two weeks off, and I can't just pull into the driveway with it now. I don't have

room for it at the shop, and Karren may see it there anyway. A call to my friend John down the street was the answer. He hid Karren's car in his garage until our day, while I made all the covert plans for the special evening.

That December night was cold and dry, a very lucky combination considering our climate here in the Miami Valley. Karren and I drove my '92 coupe to Carver's while listening to the Trans Siberian Orchestra on tape. We walked into Carver's and stood in line as the maitre d' told customers with

reservations one-by-one that it would be 20 minutes or so. When my turn came and I told her "Bernhardt for two", she replied "yes sir, right this way please". She

I told her to look to her left, and there, front and center in the parking area just off of the main entrance, was her '96 Collector Edition Corvette, silver with red interior, top down and a big red bow on the hood.

walked us to the table I had previously picked out for us, with a bottle of Berringer White Zin already on ice. Was I the man! Karren

later told me she was already impressed with me at this point.

Everyone that worked in the restaurant was privy to what was to transpire that evening, and I would notice glances every now and again from servers and managers. We had the best service ever, as our server barely let the level in Karren's glass drop, and did everything but sit down next to her and

feed her himself. At the end of our dinner, we picked up a mint from the dish at the maitre d's desk, I got another glance from the hosts, and Karren and I walked out the front door. As we walked hand-in-hand beneath the grape arbor, I told Karren her anniversary gift was a little too big for me to wrap. She replied "what do you mean"? I told her to look to her left, and there, front and center in the parking area just off of the main entrance, was her '96 Collector Edition Corvette, silver with red interior, top down and a big red bow on the hood.



Our friends who had brought the car over had remained hidden in the bar until this moment, when they came out with cameras, laughing and cheering. Employees

followed to see the look on Karren's face as she became the very next Corvette

Continued on page 4

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## Her Corvette Story (con't) By Jeff Bernhardt

Continued from page 3

owner - a Corvette that is definitely all hers. On the back of the car is an Ohio license plate for display that I had made up that simply says HERS. As I stood back to take it all in, watching all of the hugs and hearing the laughter, there was my wife of 25 years standing about 10 feet off the ground. As my



eyes moistened, I don't know who had the most fun. Karren knows me pretty well, but I think this one really took her by surprise. That was 5 years ago, but the memory seems like yesterday.

Great story Jeff, thanks for sharing.....Terry