

My GTO Story

By John Kehrein



My interest in cars started when my Dad took me to the Chevy dealership where he worked as an accountant and showed me the service bays and then let me sit in a new 1954 Corvette.

When I turned 16, Dad let me, (helped me), start buying a series of cars over the next several years through the dealership. Those cars included an Olds, a Buick, and a Chevy until we found a 1960 Pontiac Ventura. I had kind of self taught myself how to do some mechanical and body work on the other cars, but the Ventura only needed cosmetics and a 4 barrel rebuild.

My boss at the time bought a new loaded '65 Catalina and of course the challenge got issued. We almost got caught street racing so we decided to try semi local US 30 Drag strip. The Ventura launched hard, felt fast but wasn't. The Catalina became a local legend. It won every Sportsman's class it ran. It was truly a "went to work - to work - in the middle of the week" built car. So I needed a faster car; a '65 GTO should do it.

(Interestingly, at a past GTO convention, Arnie Beswick was kind enough to talk to me for



awhile. He also lived in the area of US 30 Drag strip and we determined that we had both raced there in the summer of 1965. Amazingly, he asked me if I had any pictures – no camera. He didn't remember seeing me there though; probably just because I was in a different class.)

Just then my Uncle (SAM) decided that I should go to work for him. I had liked shooting guns, but I didn't want to carry one all the time, so I believed the Air Force recruiter about an education (worked out well later), traded two years for four and enlisted. Got trained, got to work on jet fighters and other guys' cars in Texas and South Carolina, when my Dad found a perfect 1963 Bonneville for me. It was white over bronze with all that brightwork and leather inside. I got it all detailed when they decided we needed to see more of the world – yeah, you guessed it – way southeast. My Mom takes the Bonneville and loves it, says it's hers now.

So we're standing on the flightline at Saigon airbase, when the line boss gives us a copy of "Stars & Stripes" so we can ogle the centerfold. And there she is in a full body shot, gorgeous and stacked ----- a 1967 GTO. We bench raced power options and colors for weeks, and I knew some day I'd have one. I didn't know it would take 20 years.

When I got back, I got married, finished my service at Scott Air Force base on DC9s and went back to Chicago for college and to start a family. I had reclaimed the Bonneville from Mom and refurbished it to new status and went to work on the United Airlines ramp at O'Hare. So I look out the apartment window one morning and a red Ford Galaxy is parked where I'd left the Bonneville. They never found it.

Pontiacs were too expen-



sive as “my three sons” arrived – Dan, Mike, and Dave, along with baseball, football, soccer, scouts, band, etc. ---- all good times. But I kept reading the want ads and managed to flip some cars (the nicest was a '34 Chevy 2 door coupe), but no GTOs.

Finally in 1987 there was an ad for a 1966 convertible. Dad and I met with the owner, a young man needing money for college. It was rough, sagging, but all there and running. On the way home, more of the top fabric tore away. Two weeks later I was laid off from MCI Telecom, and moved to St. Louis to work for a plastics company. They would not pay to move the car, so I said “let’s drive”. Dan and I duck taped the top up, but a lot of that was quickly gone, along with the rear window that blew out and went under the semi following us. It’s driver was pounding the steering wheel and laughing hysterically. He did honk at me later when he passed us, still laughing. But Dan and Mike had a great time in the wind in the backseat – we made it the 300 plus miles.

I stripped the convertible, removed the interior and front clip, and did all the body work. At the same time, I found a 1967 GTO hardtop in Pontoon Beach Illinois. The owner decided it was too rough and was going to part it out and crush the rest. It was a no money rusty basket case – needed floors, truck floor, sills, lower rear window metal and removal of the rebel flag painted on the trunk lid. But it was all there and it ran. I put air in the tires and almost made it home when it quit. The alternator wasn’t, but a jump got it going. It was in such bad shape that I knew I couldn’t do it so I farmed it out at \$100 at a time – it took two years. With the engine and trans rebuilt, it came back as a drivable shell. Then both cars sat; laid off again.

So I bought a quick lube north of Clayton, grew it, and put all three boys through college. But I was working everyday for 16 years. Killed the marriage, but I got to keep the cars and the business.

I put the Goats in rental storage and worked on the '67 the only time I had off, on Sunday afternoons. I met Linda and she enjoyed going with on Sundays. I’d met a car-gal ! We got married. Instantly I had two daughters, Mylinda and Rebecca.

We worked on the '67 as time allowed. In total it took exactly 12 years plus 3 days (invoice to invoice) to finish the car. It’s gratifying to know that I saved one. At a POCI convention Jim Wangers took a look at our car and said that he enjoyed seeing it and posed for pictures with us.

At the same time, I farmed out the stripped '66 for paint and drivetrain rebuild. This also took two years, while I did all the pieces-parts polishing and painting. It too came back a drivable shell. The assembly process took Linda and I three years. Total time on this one (invoice to invoice) was 20 years less 2 months.

So we had two of the three “tri-sixes”, the stacked highlight years, when a '65 GTO came up on Ebay. I jokingly said it was a coin toss. So Linda got a quarter and it came up yes, (I still have the quarter). We bought it sight unseen from the gentleman who bought it from the bail bondsman who got it from the drag racer/drug dealer who built it and then got busted. It’s set up as a drag car. And the seller’s wife took one ride and said “not on my street”. It’s a bored and stroked 455/468, TH400 with reversed shifter, locker 3.55 rear under an Art Morrison drag-

pack sub frame. It drives ok, but the club Dyno day proved it had no power. The fuel and ignition systems need work, so now it's sitting.

When we got the '67 GTO finished we met Tom and Steve at a Warrenton car show, and joined the Gateway GTO Club. It's been fun ever since, so thanks for that.

My son Michael is the only one who got the car gene, so I'll help him on his '65 Mustang while I put tool kits together for our (currently) three grandkids, and get them started on the "classics".

