

# Wellness in transition

STORY AND PHOTO BY LARRY EDSALL

Each January, a couple of thousand classic cars cross the auction block at a week-long succession of sales in Arizona's Valley of the Sun. Those vehicles, spanning more than a century in production dates and ranging from Detroit classics to exotic sports cars, sell for prices ranging from a few thousand dollars to multiple millions.

But before contributing to the commercial success of the classic car marketplace, a group of classic car enthusiasts gathers not to buy and sell but to celebrate heroes, those who drive racing cars and the cars they've driven, especially cars of a certain vintage.

And while money is involved, it goes to charity. This year, the charities were The Wellness Community, a cancer education and support facility in Phoenix, and the Chip Miller Charitable Foundation, which is dedicated to finding a cure for Amyloidosis.

You may never have heard of Amyloidosis. It's a rare disease, but it claims 3000 lives each year, the result of proteins going haywire and attacking the body's own organs.

In 2004, one of the lives Amyloidosis claimed was Chip Miller's. But not before he had helped build Carlisle Events and the Carlisle (Pennsylvania) Fairgrounds complex into a gathering place for post-war car enthusiasts in the United States, and not before he had found and restored the Chevrolet Corvette that won its class in the 24 Hours of Le Mans race in 1960 and thus became the first American car to do so.

Miller's life and his mission to find, restore and reunite that Corvette with its drivers and the French track on the 50th anniversary of their victory is the

subject of Michael Brown's documentary film, *The Quest*, which was shown Sunday for the first time in the western United States.

It was fitting that the movie made its western premiere here since it was at an Arizona auction—Barrett-Jackson—that Miller's son, Lance, and film maker Michael Brown first met.

Lance Miller was at Barrett-Jackson as part of his Carlisle Events duties and Brown was there scouting up Corvette collectors to feature in what he hoped would become a cable television series. But that series was put on hold once Brown learned about Miller's father's quest to take the Corvette back to Le Mans, a quest finally fulfilled in 2010 when Lance Miller reunited the car, driver John Fitch and the Le Mans racing circuit at the front of a parade of Corvettes.

Actually, *The Quest* is about multiple quests. There was the original effort to race Corvettes at Le Mans. There was the effort to keep one of those cars running through rain and ruin and the French rulebook to just finish the race, let alone win its class. In the process, the fiberglass-bodied car went from being derided by French fans as what Fitch termed "American plastic pigs" to being cheered wildly by those same fanatic if fickle Frenchmen.

Then there was the quest to find those Le Mans Corvettes years after they'd been converted back from racing cars to road cars and been sold and resold to various owners in various places. But Miller and other Corvette enthusiasts and historians were persistent in their pursuit and have found and verified three of the four Corvettes that raced that year at Le Mans.

Which means, of course, that *The Quest* isn't over. There's still one car out there somewhere, waiting to be recovered.

The historic racing car reunion and movie premiere were held at the Arizona Biltmore as a "bridge" event between the former *Wheels of Wellness* racing car and driver show and whatever happens next year. Changes in management at The Wellness Center were about to force a hiatus—or worse.

"We felt it was important to keep that momentum going," said Lyn St. James, the former Indianapolis 500 racer who joined with two other former members of the *Wheels* organizing committee—vintage Corvette racer Scott Dames and *Vintage Motorsports* magazine chairman and chief executive Michael Silverman—and with Biltmore general manager and car enthusiast Andrew Stegen to produce the "bridge" event. Which they did in a mere two months.

In addition to the western states premiere of *The Quest*, the day featured a showcase for more than a dozen historic racing cars, including the Le Mans class-winning 1960 Corvette, a Formula One car driven by Mario Andretti, a "birdcage" Maserati, a C-type Jaguar, the Porsche 934 that finished seventh overall at Le Mans in 1977, and the reunion—after 50 years—of two original Cunningham team 1958 Lister-Jaguars—as well as several leading sports car drivers of 1950s and 1960s.

While the car count may have been down some from the *Wheels* events, the quality was undiminished and the momentum not only is going, but looks to be accelerating toward whatever happens next year. ■

