

When he was 17, Gary Kaberle fell in love with a one-of-a-kind Italian sports car.

Thirteen years later, he fell in love with a 5-foot-4 blonde who sang in an all-girls group called the Honeybees.

In time, the BAT 9 coupe would repay his devotion, with its sale financing cancer treatments that extended his wife Deb's life. A six-month death sentence turned into four years together.

The tale continues this morning at the Meadow Brook Hall in Rochester Hills, when Kaberle, a Traverse City dentist, will stand next to the BAT 11, a new car that Italian craftsmen rushed to build for him as their company slid into bankruptcy earlier this year. He hopes to one day use the car to raise money to fight cancer.

The story begins in 1963, when Kaberle, who grew up in Ewart, a village about 65 miles east of Ludington where his parents ran a café and gift shop, was visiting Greenville -- about 60 miles from Ewart and as far from home as he'd ever been.

"My whole world was a 50-mile radius of Ewart," said Kaberle, 62.

He saw the BAT 9 under a mercury vapor lamp in front of a used-car dealership.

The dealer got the car in a bankruptcy auction, apparently didn't know what a jewel he had and thought he had a live one in young Gary Kaberle. He set what seemed like a high price. Kaberle won't say exactly how much, but it was as much as a new car cost in 1963, when a brand-new Chevrolet Impala four-door sedan sold for \$2,662.

Kaberle scraped together his savings from the \$1.15 an hour he got working in the popcorn stand outside his parents' shop. "It was Ewart. There wasn't much to spend money on," he said. He was still about \$1,000 short; his grandmother made up the difference.

The BAT 9 was one of three unique sports cars built in the '50s by Italian car designer Nuccio Bertone -- creator of the Lamborghini Countach and other milestone designs.

Kaberle had no idea he owned a handmade masterpiece. He just loved the car. He drove it to work at the popcorn stand.

Kaberle's father and grandmother died of cancer not long after he bought the BAT. His mother became ill and spent a lot of time hospitalized in Traverse City. "A lot of people left my life, but the car was always there," he said.

He learned about its history -- a landmark creation by two Italian icons, the only one of its kind. He went to college, married, divorced and built his dental practice. The BAT 9 sat in his garage for years.

In 1976, he met Deb singing with the Honeybees at a Shanty Creek resort. They married in 1977 and raised three children -- one each from previous marriages and a daughter they shared.

"She said, 'Wow,' the first time she saw the BAT," Kaberle said. "She really liked riding in it. It wasn't like a car; it was a moving sculpture."

Kaberle met car buffs and auto executives who saw him driving the BAT 9 around Traverse City. One suggested he bring it to the Meadow Brook Concours d'Elegance in 1987 or '88. The car was a hit, though it didn't win any awards.

In 1989, the Concours d'Elegance in Pebble Beach, Calif., invited him to a show that would honor Bertone, the designer. Kaberle met the Italian legend, who hadn't seen the car in decades, when both went out to admire the car as the sun rose over it on a putting green at the golf course.

Later that day, the judges named the BAT 9 their favorite car at the show.

Shortly after that, Deb was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. Doctors said she had six months to live.

A doctor and car buff told Kaberle the National Institutes of Health were testing an experimental treatment. It might help, but insurance wouldn't cover it, and the cost was far beyond Kaberle's means.

Never before had Kaberle considered offers to sell the BAT 9, but now he did, for a combination of collectible cars and cash that he said added up to millions of dollars.

Deb got the experimental treatment and rallied, but they knew time was precious now. One of the cars included in the BAT sale, a Ferrari F40, came with a trip to Italy.

The BAT 9 was on display when the Kaberles visited Turin. Deb stood by the car, head bowed, as she thought about the extra time it had bought with her husband and children.

The cancer recurred in 1993. Deb was too weak to walk after her final chemotherapy treatment. Kaberle carried her up the steps to their house and laid her in bed.

She died in his arms a few hours later.

Years passed. Kaberle thought about the BAT 9 and all the people cancer had taken from him. Was there a way the car could draw greater attention to the disease, to honor Deb and help others?

The BAT 9 was gone, just another collector's trophy now, but could he create a new car, a BAT 11, to do that? (No BAT 10 was ever built.) Kaberle worked on ideas, then designs, finally a clay model with friends in the auto industry he'd met through the BAT 9. In 2006, he visited the Bertone design studio just outside Turin.

Nuccio Bertone had died, and the company was in financial difficulty. Kaberle made his presentation to Bertone's widow, Lilli Bertone, and daughters, including a video his 14-year-old son shot of the young Bertone girls playing near the BAT 9 at Pebble Beach. The company said yes, and Kaberle sold more of the cars he got for the BAT 9.

The new BAT was scheduled to be the star of Bertone's display at the Geneva auto show in Switzerland in March.

Kaberle got bad news from Turin early this year. The BAT 11 was coming along well, but the company was headed for bankruptcy. Just days before the car was to debut in Geneva, Lilli Bertone canceled the company's display at the show and said all work on the BAT 11 must cease.

Quietly, the designers rebelled. They finished work on the non-running car, snuck it out of the studio and shipped it to Geneva.

With no space at the auto show, they parked the car in an alley by the entrance to a nightclub hosting a reception for auto designers from around the world. The next morning, the BAT 11 was on the front page of Automotive News, dubbed "Geneva Eye Candy."

The BAT 11 makes what may be its only U.S. appearance at the Meadow Brook Concours d'Elegance this weekend.

The car has no engine or chassis. Building a running vehicle will cost \$2 million or \$3 million, far more money than Kaberle has left. He hopes corporations will help underwrite the car, which he wants to use to promote cancer prevention and research. He has talked with Microsoft and Bose, and Disney would like to see a script for a movie, he said.

A Disney love story. Kaberle went from small-town Evart "to seeing the world, and the car connected the dots in my life."