



*Surgical lifestyles*  
**Surgeon doctors cars**

*by Lola Butcher*

**L**ike a model ship in a bottle, a Jaguar is being restored in the basement of an eye surgeon in Philadelphia, PA. It's not a basement garage, but a regular basement with normal doors and stairs that lead to the ground floor of the house. It makes for a fun bit of conversation when children come to visit.

"They see this car and I say, 'Oh, I've been building that for years—I can't wait until I'm done so I can drive it out,'" said Michael A. DellaVecchia, MD, PhD, FACS, director of the emergency department at Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia.

The residential Jaguar—one of four automobiles Dr. DellaVecchia is currently restoring—is parked in the basement because its owner likes to use an amazing range of technical skills to solve problems.

He needed a place to work on the car, the basement was available, and the only barrier was a retaining wall that separated the garage from the basement. Naturally—that is, if you're Dr. DellaVecchia—the solution was to redesign the wall.

"I modified the wall so it could be taken apart," he said, "and then I pushed the car into the basement and put the wall back up."

***A drive to fix things***

Dr. DellaVecchia's first car, purchased when he was in graduate school, was a used Volkswagen Bug, considered worthless by its former owner, a fellow student, and sold to him for a dollar (required to transfer deed of ownership); the second, a 1962 red Jaguar with approximately 100,000 miles on the odometer. He bought it in the mid-1970s, during his pathology residency, for something like \$800.

"Partly I was going to restore it and partly I was going to just drive it around," he said. "I bought it and became sort of depressed over the purchase because it was the first time in

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my life I bought something that wasn't really necessary."

But friends intervened to nurture his relationship with the car. Originally, Dr. DellaVecchia did not have access to a garage, so that first Jaguar was parked on the street. New friends came calling.

Longtime friend Richard Showalter said of Dr. DellaVecchia, "I grew up in the same neighborhood and I used to go over and help him work on his cars."

Then a Jaguar mechanic befriended Dr. DellaVecchia and informed him that just one old car was no good. He advised that buying a "spare car" as a source of parts would reduce downtime for the car being refurbished.

"Lo and behold, that's what I did and, the next thing I know, I had four Jaguars in various states of disrepair," he said.

An inventor by nature, Dr. DellaVecchia owns a machine shop—two lathes, a drill press, other mechanical tools, design software, and so forth—that allows him to make parts for the automobiles on occasion.

He currently has four Jaguars in various stages of rehabilitation. Three of them are XK-Es, dating back to a golden era between 1961 and 1974. A two-seater E-type is credited with revolutionizing sports car design, says Dr. DellaVecchia.

Growing up in southwest Philadelphia, Dr. DellaVecchia is the only child of parents who emphasized education. They had both stopped school after fourth grade, and they wanted something different for their son.

And he wanted something different for his parents. Although the family did not own a car for most of Dr. DellaVecchia's youth, he celebrated a career milestone by taking care of that.

"When I got out of residency, I wanted to buy my father a really nice car," he said. "Dad had his nice V12L Jaguar in southwest Philly."

That car, like the others he has purchased over the years, was bought for a good price because it needed some work. The total he paid for all his Jaguars was \$8,000. He does not restore them for investment purposes, but rather as a hobby that he devotes a few hours to each week.

"I can put on my iPod and 'read' or listen to a lecture while I'm working on the car," he said.

Dr. DellaVecchia belongs to a Jaguar club, and

although he showed his refurbished vehicles in the past, he no longer makes time for that. Although he is not actively in the market for additional cars, he is open to the possibility of adding to his collection. He enjoys them and so do his friends.

Mr. Showalter, whose wedding celebration featured two DellaVecchia autos—a sports car and a 1958 sedan—laments that the ophthalmologist does not spend enough time cruising around in the eye-catching automobiles.

"The biggest problem Mike has is he works too hard. He never has time to drive them," he said. "His dedication to his work is unbelievable."

### ***A physician who knows physics***

When they were in high school together, Richard Matkevich said, it was pretty clear that Dr. DellaVecchia was going to be a high achiever.

"We kind of knew he was destined for something big," said Mr. Matkevich, a buyer for Lockheed-Martin and one of Dr. DellaVecchia's many long-time friends. "I figured he would be a scientist."

That was correct, although his career pushed beyond science. Using academic scholarships to pay for his education, Dr. DellaVecchia earned a bachelor's degree in physics from LaSalle University and master's and doctorate degrees in biomedical science and engineering from Drexel University.

From there, he went to Temple University School of Medicine, where he completed residencies in anatomical pathology, clinical pathology, and ophthalmology.

In fact, Dr. DellaVecchia is one of very few people to do three medical residencies on top of a doctorate in biomedical engineering. That mix of training and experience has served him well.

With dozens of research publications among his credits, Dr. DellaVecchia holds four patents. He has helped start companies, directed laboratories, advised state and federal emergency preparedness agencies, and served as a consultant to the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Throughout his career, he has taught ophthalmology, pathology, and engineering at his alma maters and other Philadelphia-area universities. In 2003, he moved into academic medicine full-time as director of the emergency department at Wills Eye Institute at Thomas Jefferson Uni-

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versity, considered one of the most advanced eye centers in the world.

Wills Eye Institute, one of the few hospitals in the country that has a 24-hour dedicated eye emergency room, draws patients from a wide region. Many of them have suffered a degree of trauma that requires the special expertise available at Wills.

Although he enjoys teaching and supervising residents, as well as the challenge of emergency room medicine, the Philadelphia location of Wills Eye is an added bonus to this lifelong Philadelphian who completed 18 years of higher education in three universities in one city.

"I ended up as director of the world-renowned emergency department within 10 minutes of where I was born and raised," he said.

A few evenings and Saturdays each month are devoted to his private practice. "I didn't want to abandon my patients, so I have a small, old-fashioned, almost country-type practice," he said. "It's just me and the patients."

That means Dr. DellaVecchia serves as receptionist, billing clerk, and head of the information technology department.

"I have a lot of computerized technology so when a patient calls [and the call is missed], I know it and I can track them down," he said. "So I call back and schedule an appointment."

The private practice is not for extra income so much as to provide continuity of care for long-time patients and people they want to refer. Dr. DellaVecchia refers to the practice of giving back to the community, a theme that his old friends took note of a long time ago.

"His parents were always trying to make him a better person and he returned that by taking care of all the old folks in the neighborhood," Mr. Matkevich said.

Even though he was trained as a pathologist and eye specialist, Dr. DellaVecchia was called upon for all sorts of medical advice in the neighborhood where he grew up.

"He knew people needed help, and he likes helping people out," Mr. Showalter said.

### ***The past is the present***

It may not be the sleek design or the luxury mystique of old Jaguars that attracted Dr. DellaVecchia to his primary hobby so much as it was

the collection of moving parts that needed to be set right. His friend Mr. Matkevich sees a pattern in the surgeon's professional and pleasure pursuits.

"It all ties in together with [his interest in] the intricate details and the meticulous ways of doing things," he said.

That is why, when he does not want to crawl under a car, Dr. DellaVecchia relaxes by repairing an old watch. He learned the skill by serving as a needed apprentice to his grandfather, who fixed watches as a part-time business.

"I remember as a small boy he would pick me up and place me on the kitchen table where he repaired his watches," Dr. DellaVecchia said. "And he would have me put the little screwdriver in the little slots of the pocket watches so he could take them apart."

Thus, his grandfather, who had poor eyesight, exposed his young grandson to two activities that have come to define his life.

"That was my first experience in repairing mechanical things," he said. "And now that I look back on it, it was my first contact with a patient who was visually compromised."

Starting with pocket watches inherited from his father and grandfather, Dr. DellaVecchia has collected at least 25 watches of different types in recent years.

"Because they are so old, pocket watches are generally kind of compromised," he said. "You find ones that are in various states of disrepair, so you have to cannibalize other ones to get them working."

In that way, fixing a watch gives the same satisfaction that restoring a luxury automobile does. He calls mechanical pursuits "therapeutic," a distraction from working to save a patient's eyesight.

"If something breaks, if something doesn't work, if you get a bad outcome, it's just metal," he said. "And then on those days when you get it all running right, turn the key, go out for a nice drive... it's worth the effort." □

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