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## Pioneering female car designer shares insights

By Laura Damon  
Staff writer

NEWPORT — Joan Creamer said her interest in cars started when she was young.

"I didn't play with dolls," she said. "I've always liked cars."

Creamer spoke Saturday afternoon at the National Museum of American Illustration, 492 Bellevue Ave., about her experiences working for General Motors as an exterior designer in the 1960s. She also spoke of her current project, which is creating a replica of the 1966 Batmobile that was featured in the "Batman" TV show starring Adam West.

Creamer was inspired to create a 2020 recreation of the iconic vehicle after spotting a 1966 replica at a Comic-Con show in December. She started to do research on the Batmobile soon after, she said.

The Ford company's Lincoln division designed the Futura, which made its debut in 1955, and that automobile was used as the concept car for the Batmobile, Creamer said.

The concept for the Futura, a car with sharp, fin-like edges, began when William Schmidt, an automobile designer for Ford, and Bill Mitchell, an automobile designer for GM, went scuba diving together while on a Caribbean vacation. The men were inspired by the aquatic life.

"A lot of it comes from nature," Creamer said, referring to the inspiration for automobile designs.

Years after the Caribbean vacation, Mitchell produced the Mako Shark Corvette, along with other fin-like automobiles like the Firebird III. For Schmidt, the mako sharks and manta rays he saw on his scuba adventure years earlier influenced his concept sketches for the Futura.

The Futura had features such as bucket seats, interior lights that were activated when the doors were opened and a telephone. The vehicle traveled on a show circuit from 1955-1959. The car was unveiled at the Chicago Auto Show, then Detroit and finally the New York Auto Show.

"A work of art. It really was so different, so out of place," Creamer said.

At the urging of George Barris, a designer of many famous cars, the Futura wound up in Hollywood to be featured in the film "It Started With A Kiss," starring Debbie Reynolds and Glen Ford. After a few more movie stints, the Futura returned to California, where it sat in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio lot. The vivid red paint faded, the tires deflated and the car deteriorated as it sat unused.

Barris bought the lackluster Futura



Justin Walker Photography

Former General Motors car designer Joan Creamer talks about the famed 1966 Batmobile during her lecture on Saturday at the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport.

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for \$1, Creamer said.

In the 1960s, Hollywood needed a Batmobile for the television show "Batman." Barris was called upon to assist in securing a suitable vehicle for the Caped Crusader to drive.

Barris decided to use the skeleton of the Futura; all it needed was some renovations. Forty coats of super-gloss black paint were applied to the vehicle, as well as a fluorescent trim so the Batmobile would "pop" on TV. A 5-gallon paint can was added for the exhaust turbine as well as two parachutes.

In 1966, the same year the Batmobile was customized for the TV series, Creamer graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Art and was hired by GM as an exterior designer.

Her 2017 project has been the design of a mid/rear-engine automobile that resembles the original Batmobile. She showed some of her Batmobile sketches to her audience in Newport on Saturday.

"You do have fun," Creamer said of car designing. "They let you escape and let your creativity go."

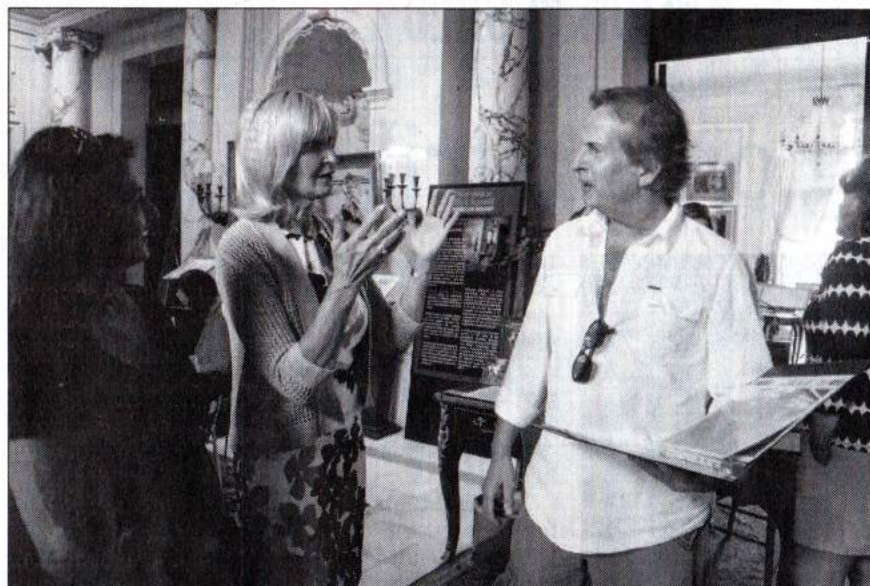
She now is a member of the League of Retired Automotive Designers.

She was the only woman in the auto design industry during her three-and-a-half years with GM, Creamer said.

"I'd say a handful," she answered when asked how many women work in that industry today.

Creamer was asked if she faced sexism in a male-dominated field in the 1960s.

"It wasn't bad for me, but it was hard for the men," she said. "It was easy for me ... I wanted to design. All I wanted to do



Justin Walker Photography

Former General Motors car designer Joan Creamer, center, talks with Suchan Sivam and John Antonellis during her appearance on Saturday at the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport.

was design.

"Every time a woman takes a step it helps the (next one) coming up."

Gabrielle Liberman, 11, lives in Texas but was visiting her grandparents in Newport. She attended Creamer's lecture with her family.

"I thought it was really cool," Gabrielle said, adding she admired Creamer's determination to succeed.

She "just kept going. It's not just like you have to be a lady," Gabrielle said.

"She has paved the way for women," said Rebecca Blumen of Newport. "You rarely get to meet people who are in the history books already."

Judy Cutler, director of the National Museum of American Illustration, said women were not encouraged to pursue careers such as Creamer's in the 1960s. Women who graduated from college typically moved on to teaching or jobs traditionally associated with femininity, she said.

But it wasn't just the females in the audience who were impressed by Creamer's presentation.

"I thought it was great," said John Antonellis of Boston. "It was quite enlightening."

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