



Great Garages

THE BEST BATCAVE WEST OF GOTHAM

Written by David M. Brown

Riddle me this, crimefighting fans: What Valley of the Sun resident maintains a super-equipped Batcave and turbines up the Batmobile regularly for the enjoyment of children with lifelong or life-threatening illnesses?

You don't have to fidget until the next episode to find out.

He's Charles Keller, a former Apple Computers whizkid who parachuted to an early retirement into Gotham City and decided that, like millionaire Bruce Wayne, he would do good with his life rather than just live good. Inspired by his hero, Charles fights the night of childhood disease. [Editor's Note: Wayne reportedly makes more than \$100 billion annually but gives so much of it away to charity that he retains his legendary millionaire status.]

With his Dynamic Duo, sons Chaz, 9, and Cade, 7, and valiantly supported by his wife of 15 years this November, Megan, Charles doubles in the roles of the magnanimous civic servant, officing in One Wayne Center, and A.L.F.R.E.D., the indefatigably loyal family butler — Ambassador & Liaison for Research, Education & Development.

Together and as one, they offer children and their families and friends the superhero experience of Batman and his unBatlievable underground lair, located just southwest of Gotham, deep beneath stately Wayne Manor.

Keller began the Batcave in November 2011 and

opened it October 2012. The grand opening will be March 2013. The study features a sliding bookcase behind which are highly children's approved Batpoles that "lower" into the cave. The grotto contains most every gadget, device and vehicle from the show. WOW! Here's the Batcomputer! Holy authenticity!

A Show of Sharing

"Here is a wealthy guy who uses his money not just for his own enjoyment but to truly make the world better and safer for all," says Keller, who lives in Phoenix with his family. "He also passes this wisdom and passion to his young ward. The two of them are honest, moral, hard-working, but most of all they put others first and by doing so their lives are made all the richer."

As he approached his 50th birthday this year, he wanted his life to be more than an early, fortunate retirement: "Now that I am on the back side of life and have had my share of successes, I also wish to figure out a way to give back. It was important to me that this be done in a way that reflected not just my values but also my sense of humor. Still more important was that it be something my two boys could both enjoy, grasp and ultimately emulate."

During his youth, he watched the campy, colorful '60s television series with great joy: "To this day I can watch the episodes, and they make me laugh out loud," he says. "The actors put so much into their characters,

and that is what makes them completely unforgettable." And, curvaceous crimebuster, Yvonne Craig, decked in haute Batgirl couture, was his first TV crush. ZOWEE!

"I understand what it is like to have poor health and no answers," he says, recalling a youth suffering with chronic illness continuing through adulthood. "I feel deeply for what these families go through and not just the kids. Everybody suffers: parents, grandparents, siblings, all of them. That we can give them all a reason to smile, all the better."

As a result, for the last four years he has been working with groups such as Hope Kids, Phoenix Children's Hospital and Starlight Children's Foundation, a global organization celebrating its 30th year helping seriously ill children and their families cope with their pain, fear and isolation through entertainment, education and family activities.

Last year, more than 74,000 people statewide were helped by Starlight, says Jo Ann Yeo, its director. "However, this figure is only a fraction of the estimated 342,000 chronically ill children in Arizona," she says.

"As the population grows, so too does the need to bring high-quality program and services to these children and their families," she adds. "We adore Charles Keller and his family and are very thankful for his personal involvement and support of Starlight."

"In our society there are so many examples of people who gain fame, wealth and notoriety by making bad, even dreadful decisions," Charles says. "Yet every year, there is a brand new crop of youngsters who choose to don their Batman or Batgirl outfits and within their young imaginations fight for all that is right and good."

"Sure Batman is fun, but it is also a life lesson that comes in a bright box with a shiny bow on top," he adds. "Just like Mr. Wayne, I am all the richer for it."

The first stop for the Batmobile was a Make-A-Wish event, with his sons as goodwill ambassadors, greeting guests. From the start, he told his boys it isn't about the car but the caring: "Yes, we sure do love our cars, but our real story is about the principle of sharing with those in need and how doing so enriches our lives."

Colten

One of the first rides, that December, was Colten, for whom the Batcave is named: The Colten Cowell Memorial Bat Cave. "It was an experience that is not just something I will never forget; it something that has changed the direction of my life," Charles says.

Colten's parents Erika and Earl were told by their doctors that Colten's condition was terminal and recommended they go home and spend family time together. Word reached Make A Wish of Arizona, who it turn



Mr. Wayne's palatial study contains many secrets, not the least of which is a switch inside Shakespeare's bust that activates a real sliding bookcase. I wonder where that secret passageway leads?



asked Charles if a Batmobile visit could be arranged.

Could Colten have a ride?

As it was Christmas, Santa came, too, in traditional, not Batattire. When they arrived at the house, the hospice staff was setting up the morphine and oxygen that would be Colten's constant companions: "I never remember being so happy and so sad at the exact same moment in time," Charles recalls. "It was wrenching."

He gave Earl the keys to the Batmobile — the first time he let another he had not met before drive the car. "It was a boy and his pop doing what comes naturally to most every father and son: smiling, laughing, and, yes, even fighting a little crime."

When they returned from reconnoitering, Colten, who could not speak, signed to his dad: "I could not see what he was motioning, and so I looked to his dad, who with welled-up eyes, told me in a shaken voice: 'He wants to go again; he is asking for more,'" Charles says.

So off they did for Colten's final ride: In two weeks, he was gone, dreaming of the Batmobile.

Nathan and Batdog, Sandra

Another recent guest was Nathan Cauthren, who came with his parents, Denise and Ward, brothers and sisters, and friends and his golden retriever, Sandra, provided by Power Paws Assistance Dogs, Phoenix.

"Our visit to the Batcave and meeting Charles Keller

will always be a cherished memory for my family, and knowing we were able to give back to organizations that are special to us through Wayne Foundation is just icing on the cake," Denise says.

"It was a blast and more fun than I could even imagine. I loved all the gizmos and gadgets and riding in the Batmobile," Nathan adds. "When I was able to give the people that helped me to get Power Paws a giant check donation, I was super happy." In addition to other gifts, each nominated child donates an authentic \$1,000 check to his or her chosen charity from the Wayne Foundation.

Each child also receives a letter from Mr. Wayne, inscribed with words, including these: "While the Batmobile has been my greatest single achievement, owning a Batmobile is not in and of itself a great thing. What brings me the most happiness is not owning this most magnificent machine, but rather it is sharing with others that truly brings me joy. . . . Work hard to achieve something important in your life, whatever that may be, and in turn share it with the world. The rest of us need whatever it is that you have to offer."

This month, *Highline Autos* and its readers are the richer for entry to, and the offerings of, the Batcave:

1966 Batmobile — Of course, there are many Batmobiles roaming the streets and gracing car collections, each with a story. Charles' story begins, when his boys, 3 and 5, received a Valentine's Day DVD of the 120 original-show episodes.



Why to the Bat Poles, naturally. Lesser superheroes might use a staircase or a laundry chute, but Mr. Wayne insists on sparing no expense! The rapid descent saves valuable crime fighting seconds.



Bat Parachute Van: While many of Mr Wayne's cars are for his personal enjoyment, some aid the Batmobile in its' duties. Behold the Bat Parachute Pickup Service Van. Hey, Bat Parachutes don't pick up themselves (but we are working on it).

"What happened next was such a joy to watch. That evening as we watched the first episode, you could see their little imaginations go wild. They would swing wildly at imaginary villains during the fight sequences (POW! SPLATT!! BAM!!!)," he recalls. They began suiting up before watching the show, with beach towels as capes and paper plates as masks. "Their excitement was inspiring."

So, he began his Batresearch and connected in Los Angeles with the great George Barris, designer and builder of the original Batmobile, which recently sold at Barrett-Jackson Scottsdale for \$4.6 million. Barris based the car on the 1950s Ford concept, the Lincoln Futura.

Charles tested Batmobiles nationwide and bought the current model in April 2009 in Texas. When not being used for families or in parades — on March 2, it led Tillman's Ride 2013, supporting veterans — the car sits on bad-guys wait atop a turntable inside the Batcave.

He enhanced the car with a sound system to blast the Batman theme while exiting Dairy Queen drive-thrus with his young guests; installed LED lights in the rocket exhaust to simulate heat given off by the atomic reactor; attached bat placards to the wheels; and added other "gizmos" to enhance the experience, including Batfetti —

the tissue paper is shaped like little black bats — which exit through one of three tubes on the rear of the car.

Soon to be delivered to the Batcave is the new Batmobile, custom built on a 1979 Lincoln Town Car frame and outfitted with a GM crate engine dynoed at 500 horses; Art Morrison front end and rear axle; four-wheel disk brakes; a deluxe sound system inside the car for passengers and loud speakers fore and aft for parades; and a real rocket exhaust that will shoot out a powerful flame.

Built by Fiberglass Freaks of Logansport, Ind., it will be the only 1966 Batmobile to have both an iPad and iPhone connected via Bluetooth to the traditional 1966 Batphone. In addition, there will be a roll-top dash, covered with multi colored blinking lights, air-conditioning, extensive lighting and sound effects, and, of course, Batfetti.

"I think it will be one of the three or four finest Batmobiles on the planet," Charles says.

The Bat Cycle — You remember how that nefarious bird, Penguin, nabs the Batmobile, ignominiously renaming it the Birdmobile and scampering off with a fortune in wedding gifts he pilfered after leaving a wealthy heiress at the altar: Cad! But The Caped Crusaders flew after him

on a 1965 Harley Electra Glide with a side car.

The original Harley is very expensive just to find, so Charles opted for a new Ural T, and Shane and Karen Mustoe, owners of Brighton Motorsports and Brighton Ranch Paint & Body in Scottsdale, completed the conversion and the paint at cost. "They did a spectacular job," he says.

"The Bat Cycle has proven to be a huge hit both with kids and with parents who are licensed to drive it," he says. "The reactions are priceless."

Batmobile Parachute Pickup Service Van — Batman negotiates a Bat-turn worthy of Bondurant — a 180-degree directional maneuver to catch the circuitous malefactors, and chutes release. But they are left on sacred Gotham ground, and that's littering, ABC! "How could it be that Batman, the world's foremost lawman, was breaking the very laws he was sworn to enforce?" thousands of letter-writing fans wanted to know.

The network's four-wheeled answer appeared only in a three-second clip that was recycled in later episodes, including stunts serving Gotham's most ruthless villains in different livery.

This one is a 1969 Dodge A100 panel van, purchased from Canada in correct Sky Blue, equipped with the original 225-cubic-inch slant 6 (no need for atomic power here).

Inside, the van is customized with graphics from the original show, and passengers can enjoy a three-minute movie that recounts the history of the original vehicle as well as shows all the cameos it had during the program's three-year prime-time run. And, on the rear of the van, a flat screen can produce, at a touch, any of the 120 episodes as well as the 1966 Batman movie.

What's next at the Gotham City Batcave? Will our heroes meet the challenges of 21st-century naughtiness? Stay tuned, says deep-toned Charles Keller, alias humanitarian Bruce Wayne, alias faithful Alfred, alias the superific Caped Crusader: "Same Bat Time, Same Bat Channel!"

For information on arranging a visit to the Batcave, see brucewayne@gothamcitymotors.com.

If you or someone you know has a GreatGarage and would like it to be considered for an upcoming issue, e-mail us at GreatGarages@highline-autos.com.