



*Howard Kehr*

# HOWARD H. KEHRL

1923–2013

Elected in 1985

*“In recognition of his outstanding contributions to the advancement of automotive science and engineering.”*

BY JAY WETZEL

**H**OWARD HARMON KEHRL was born on February 2, 1923, in Detroit. He was raised by his mother Martha, who had emigrated from Germany. The Great Depression was a very challenging time for the family. Having an affinity for cars and all things mechanical distinguished Howard at an early age. He enjoyed fast cars in his teens and supported himself in school by selling the cars he had rebuilt.

## **Howard the Student**

Howard was an excellent student and earned a scholarship to Wayne State University. While there he met Mary Katherine Maloney, the love of his life, and they would marry a few years later. Howard left Wayne State to enlist in the Navy during World War II. He was commissioned an ensign after completing the Naval Officers Training Program. He taught an engineering course in the Notre Dame Midshipmen’s School. He graduated from Illinois Institute of Technology with a bachelor of science degree as well as the Midshipmen’s School in 1944 as part of the Naval Officers Training Program. He received a master of science degree in engineering mechanics from the University of Notre Dame in 1948. While there, he also taught engineering subjects.

**Howard the Professional: Engineer and Executive**

Kehrl joined General Motors in 1948 as a college graduate in training with the Research Laboratories and a year later he became a research engineer. He was transferred to the Cadillac Motor Car Division Tank Plant in Cleveland in 1951 as a senior project engineer and later was appointed assistant staff engineer. In 1954, he joined the engineering department of the Chevrolet Central Office in Detroit and subsequently served as development engineer, design engineer, and director of the Engineering Laboratories. During that period, General Motors sponsored him as a Sloan Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he achieved his master's degree in industrial management.

Kehrl was appointed manager of quality control at Chevrolet in 1961. He was transferred to Oldsmobile as assistant chief engineer in 1964 and was named chief engineer in 1969. He was appointed general manager of Oldsmobile on May 25, 1972, and was elected a vice president of General Motors and named to the administration committee on June 5.

On November 5, 1973, Kehrl was appointed group executive in charge of the Car and Truck Group. One year later, he became executive vice president in charge of the General Motors technical and planning staffs, and was elected to the board of directors and the executive committee. He was given added responsibility for the overseas group in August 1978, and in August 1979 was elected to the finance committee. Two years later, he was elected vice chairman in a major restructuring of the General Motors leadership. As vice chairman, he had jurisdiction over the corporation's technical staffs, operating staffs, and public affairs groups. He also served as a member of the corporation's ten policy groups and its finance, executive, and administration committees. He served in that position until December 31, 1986, when he elected to retire.

**Howard, the Man I Knew**

I joined the Pontiac Division of General Motors in 1963 as an engineer in training and met Mr. Kehrl, who personally took

time to welcome all the newly hired engineers. He was a tall statuesque person with a military-like posture and piercing eyes, and as he reached out to shake my hand, his military persona melted away, a big smile appeared, and he reflected compassion and warmth as he put all of us newbies at ease. With tremendous energy and knowledge, he shared his experiences as a long-ago new hire, the two-year training program upon which we were about to embark, the current and future state of automotive technology, and the potential career paths that were available for us. Within an hour he laid out our future and assured all of us that we had made the correct decision to join the GM team.

While Howard's career was on the GM fast track, he was definitely the right person at the right time for all his assignments. He played a key role in the rebirth of the auto industry during the postwar era, the start of the horsepower race, new technology for manufacturing and engineering leading to productivity and product improvements, the adoption of the catalytic converter and unleaded fuel, carburetors replaced by fuel injection, powertrain and vehicle systems managed by onboard computers, the oil embargo, new government agencies for clean air and auto safety, and new regulations driving engineers and scientists to discover potential technology and affordable practical solutions. Howard played a major role in guiding GM in these exciting and hectic years.

I was very blessed to have worked closely with Howard during the time he was the executive vice president in charge of the General Motors Technical Center, while I was the chief engineer at Pontiac and later the cofounder and VP of engineering for the Saturn Car Company. Much later I was appointed a GM VP in charge of GM's Technical Centers including chairmanship of the Engineering Vice Presidents Committee, positions once held by Mr. Kehrl.

My observations of Mr. Kehrl as the man are as follows: Howard was a first-class gentleman. I will always remember him for his welcoming smile that was always genuine, his unlimited energy, and his enthusiasm that was very

contagious. Howard was always willing to lend a helping hand while instilling a team-based can-do mindset.

Howard was a passionate leader who loved the automobile, the customer, and all aspects of the business enterprise of creating, manufacturing, and retailing the General Motors family of vehicles. He had a very special talent for discovering the best in people and then nurturing their special talent for the good of the program, the team, and the individual. He created excitement at all levels of employee contribution up and down the organization and across all aspects of the business. His special approach in dealing with people created individual pride in the execution of their responsible tasks within a team-driven program. By using encouragement and appreciation, Howard was always able to get everyone to do their best. When people or teams approached him with an opportunity, he would show his interest by listening intently, asking a few questions, and then replaying the proposal back to the team with a few of his own additions in a manner that energized everyone's passion to act upon it.

Howard understood the importance of networking as a means of mentoring many of us to take the correct path in carrying out our responsibilities within GM and the industry and he was always eager to acknowledge others for their contribution to the effort. He put excitement back into the ownership experience of a General Motors vehicle by bringing all aspects of the business together as one team on a common mission. As a result, styling took the lead, engineering delivered the performance promised by the look, manufacturing built in the quality and reliability, and sales, advertising, and marketing delivered the message to the market.

Howard was definitely a role model for all of us to follow—a professional who mentored rather than pontificated, an encourager, and a good friend to many. He demonstrated by personal example that the competitive pressures of the automotive business could be kept in check when integrity, humor, willingness, and appreciation were added to one's daily outlook. These represent some of the special gifts that Howard so willingly gave to so many of us.

**Howard Takes His Talents to a Place Beyond the Grasp of Human Understanding**

Howard Harmon Kehrl passed away peacefully at age 90 on October 1, 2013, at his home in Rancho Palos Verdes, California. He and Mary were happily married for 67 years and raised four children. Howard dedicated his retirement to the enjoyment of his family.