

A dynamic photograph of a red Ferrari sports car racing on a track. The car is in the lower right corner, moving towards the left. The background is a blurred racetrack with a checkered flag pattern in the upper left corner. The overall scene is captured with a sense of motion and speed.

Wishing UPON A Car

WILKES ALUMNA RACES HER FERRARI
TO BENEFIT CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION
By Helen Kaiser



PHOTO COURTESY OF
FERRARI NORTH AMERICA

For Mandy S. Williams '77, racing her Ferrari 430 at speeds up to 175 mph on road tracks is “the ultimate adrenaline rush.” She gets a quieter thrill from knowing that her passion has helped to raise more than \$1 million during the past 10 years for the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

AT HER DAY JOB, WILLIAMS IS A SUCCESSFUL management consultant in Houston. Her expertise in business development, strategic planning, operations and finance stems from more than 30 years in the oil, gas and finance industries. She earned her bachelor's degree in economics with a minor in business administration from Wilkes and an MBA in finance and international business from New York University/London Graduate School of Business Administration.

With her consulting practice, The CEA Group Inc., Williams says she has an ideal situation because she can pick and choose to work with companies that she knows or that interest her.

During the racing season, however, she spends 10 to 15 percent of her life completely focused on cars. She and other competitors meet twice a weekend for seven weekends from March through October. It's all for fun, as no prize money is awarded.

"The nice thing about racing as a hobby is that it's a total escape from everything," she says. "At work, you take issues home with you, and the in-box is always there. Racing is finite. When the race is over, the race is over."

Right: Williams exited quickly when what she thought was smoke enveloped her car. It turned out to be steam from a ruptured hose.
PHOTO COURTESY OF FERRARI NORTH AMERICA

Below: Seat time is critical to preparing for a race, Williams says.
PHOTO BY DENNIS STRINI

Williams likens her pastime to a high-speed chess game, requiring extreme concentration and constant adjustments. While it is exciting, she also finds it relaxing because of the total focus required.

She tends to be on edge the day of a race, but she's calm right before the green flag drops. She knows that she has trained and has practiced.

"Seat time is most critical," Williams says. "Your reactions have to be automatic. When you have to look ahead to set up for corners, yet are in traffic, it's too late to think about what you're going to do."

Every track is different. Williams has participated in Italy at the Ferrari international finals and in Canada for the Ferrari North America Challenge. Road America in Elkhart Lake, Wis., is memorable for a dramatic corner on the backside known as "the kink," she says.



The track at Road Atlanta is intimidating, she says, with all its twists and turns and elevation changes: “There is a steep drop into the front straight. Imagine cresting a blind hill at high speed, under a bridge no less, and then feeling like you are plunging straight down. The elevation changes so dramatically you have a hard time with the concept.

“You have to keep your foot on the throttle to balance the rear end of the car while turning to avoid hitting a wall. Lots of fun!”

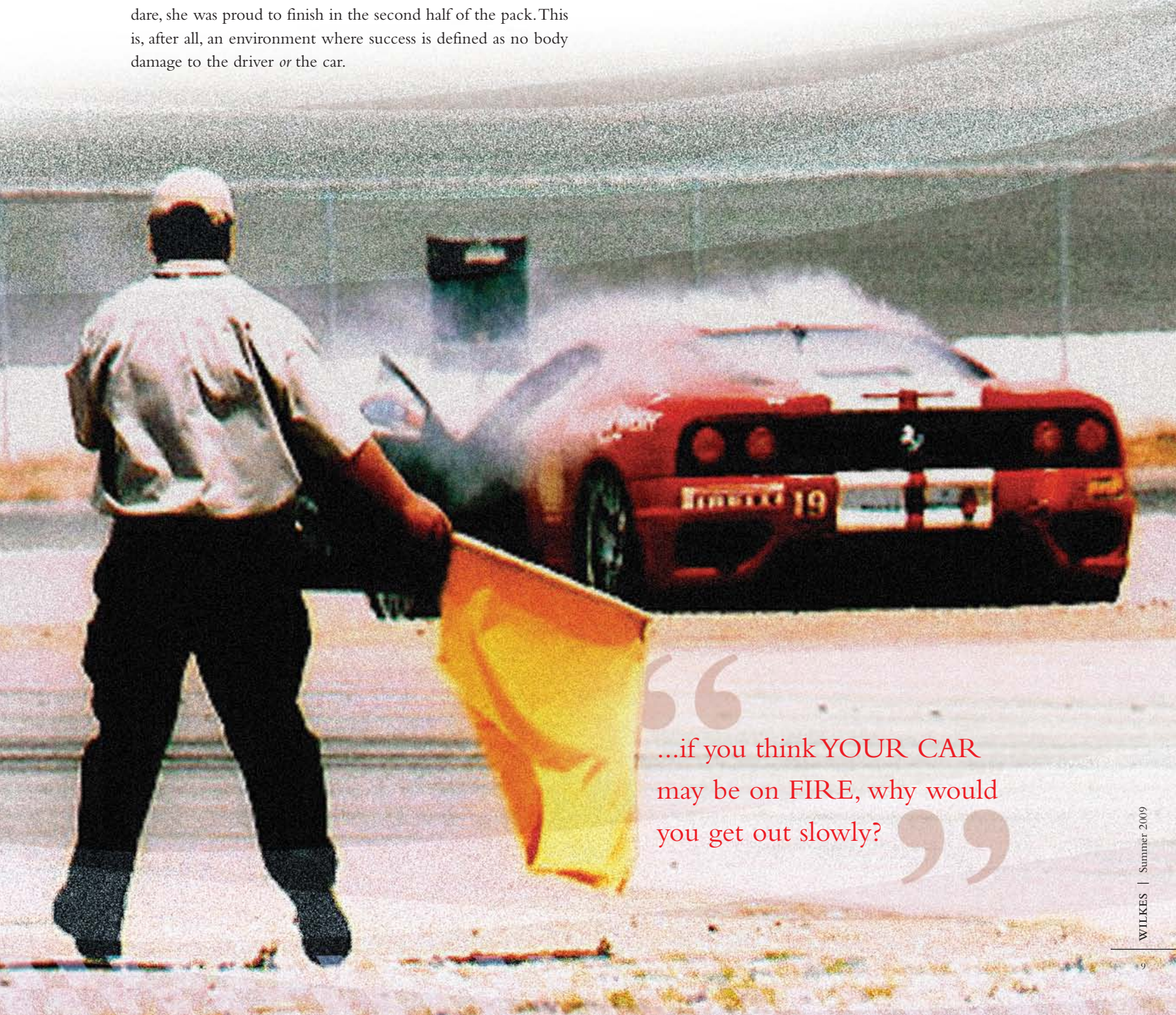
This venue was actually only the second race in which Williams ever competed, back in 1999 in her Porsche 996. Her friends figured it would be too much of a challenge for her.

“That was all I needed to hear,” she recalls. Inspired by the dare, she was proud to finish in the second half of the pack. This is, after all, an environment where success is defined as no body damage to the driver *or* the car.

There have been close calls. Once, at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway during the next to last lap of a 45-minute race, a water hose in her vehicle ruptured.

“I was on the straightaway, but couldn’t see a thing because of what looked like all this smoke. I wanted to pull off somewhere safe so the race could continue without my being in the way, so . . . I drove off the track and hit the button that sets off the fire extinguishing system and exited the car.

“People watching said they never saw anyone get out of a car so quickly—if you think your car may be on fire, why would you get out slowly?” It was later determined to be steam clouds from the water vapor that enveloped the car.



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...if you think YOUR CAR
may be on FIRE, why would
you get out slowly?
”



Williams' driver's seat was custom-made for her female frame.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF FERRARI NORTH AMERICA

Another incident occurred, not during a race, but at a special event at No Problem Raceway near New Orleans. "I lost power, looked in my rear-view mirror to see a flash fire and heard a loud bang," she recalled. "The engine had blown up, and there was a flash fire from the oil escaping until there was nothing left to burn."

Scott Gresham, crew chief for the Ferrari of Houston race team, describes Williams as "pretty calm for the most part" in situations like this. "That's important, because panic won't help if it's a true fire situation," he says, admitting it's easier for him to remain calm because he's not in the car.

"Racing can be scary," Williams says, "because we're all amateurs. I've seen some pretty bad wrecks. But mostly what's damaged is the driver's pride and wallet. You realize how well-built the cars are and what they can sustain."

A self-described "motor head," Williams laughs that her car payments were once more than her mortgage. She drives a blue Ferrari street car — a 430 Spider convertible — for daily use, but prefers her Mercedes G Wagon when she goes anywhere at night. She also still owns her first sports car, a 993 Porsche convertible, and a vintage 1957 Porsche 356 racecar. Her current red racing Ferrari 430 sports two white stripes and the names of Make-A-Wish benefactors.

It looks similar to the street car but has been modified with racing seats, harnesses, a fire safety system and cages on the driver and passenger sides in case of rolls or side impacts. Oh, and there's no stereo system.

Her driver's seat was custom-made for her female frame, so she doesn't "flop around like a fish" as she whizzes along the course. In this high-profile, competitive environment Williams is usually the only woman around.

She says in order to succeed she needs to have the physical strength to control the vehicle as well as the endurance to make it to the race's end. That's why she does a lot of running and weight training as part of her fitness regime.

"Racing is very physical and exhausting. You need your arms to control the car and your legs to brace yourself from being thrown right and left on the corners," Williams explains. The vehicle's vibrations tend to bother her back, which she injured at the age of 15 in gymnastics.

Crew chief Gresham says Williams' slight physical frame (between 111 and 115 pounds) and excellent physical condition are bonuses on the track. "She's able to stay pretty consistent throughout the race and doesn't fade toward the end like some drivers who may not be in as good shape," he said.

Certainly, this is not your typical hobby, Williams admits. "There's this motivation to prove to yourself that you can do it — the challenge side of it."

As a side benefit, she has become a role model to her two young nieces, Natasha and Sawyer, to let them know girls can do anything — even race cars.

Williams became involved in racing after buying the 993 Porsche convertible in 1997. The local dealer advised there were "track days" where owners can learn the feel and the potential of their vehicles on a race track.

"I just loved it. It was such a thrill," she recalls. She soon acquired a 996 hardtop Porsche and had a roll cage welded in it to take on the track. She also decided to attend the Bondurant School of High Performance Driving in Phoenix.

The rest, as they say, is history—including the successful relationship with Make-A-Wish. Early on, Williams noticed that many drivers displayed names of sponsors on their cars.

"I decided I would not display any product or company names on my car unless they made a contribution to the Make-A-Wish Foundation," Williams notes. "I am very happy to say that I was able to complete 11 races my rookie season, but I am more proud of the fact that I was able to



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It made me realize . . . that whatever PROBLEMS I thought I had were truly insignificant in the REAL SCHEME of things.”

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raise almost \$25,000 (that year) for the Make-A-Wish Foundation through corporate sponsorship,” she says.

“For a few seasons I actually raced two cars, the '57 Porsche and a Ferrari. I went from no-tech to high-tech,” she laughs. “The Porsche is so much fun to throw around the track, as it is small and light — versus the Ferrari, which is a much more serious racecar.”

Williams currently serves as advisor to the Make-A-Wish Foundation of the Texas Gulf Coast and Louisiana, after having served the maximum term on the organization’s board of directors. She is founder and president of the organization’s Endowment Foundation.

Her involvement with the nonprofit, which grants wishes to children under age 18 who have life-threatening medical conditions, was sparked by hearing the words of a “wish child” at a charity fundraiser she had attended many years ago. “It made me realize . . . that whatever problems I thought I had were truly insignificant in the real scheme of things,” she says.

Teresa E. Andrepont, president and CEO of the Make-A-Wish chapter, says Williams has “a superior business mind, combined with a soft heart and a determined spirit.”

It was during her undergraduate studies at Wilkes University that Williams stoked her business skills. “I’ve always been interested in business, and my first love was advertising,” she says. “I had an uncle who worked on Madison Avenue, and I worked in New York City for a time, as well.”

She fondly remembers Wilkes faculty members Scott Burnside, an executive at The Boston Store who taught her retailing, and Theodore Engel, who still teaches economics.

Now, years later, she uses her business education both professionally and philanthropically. Make-A-Wish’s Andrepont says that due to Williams’ efforts, the agency has been able to set aside an endowment for unforeseen needs. Additionally, Williams helped raise funds to purchase a refurbished house in Houston’s museum district to serve as headquarters for Make-A-Wish, which had been bouncing around from one donated office space to another.

Another project helped make a dream come true for a sick child who had always wanted to go to Italy. With Williams’ leadership and more than \$10,000 in support from fellow members in her local Ferrari Club, he and his immediate family were able to make the trip.

Despite her impressive fundraising total, Williams believes she’s getting the better part of the deal. “Being involved with wish children and their families — seeing their optimistic outlook on life, sharing their dreams, sharing their heartache — makes me appreciate all that I have.”

Mandy S. Williams, Houston, Texas

B.A., Economics 1977

MBA, Finance and International Business, New York University/London Graduate School of Business Administration 1979

Career: After more than 30 years in oil, gas and finance industries, runs her own management consulting firm.

Notable: Driven to make a difference by raising more than \$1 million for Make-A-Wish Foundation racing her Ferrari on the amateur circuit.

Favorite Wilkes Place: The women’s dormitory buildings, located in historic houses with rich architectural details.

