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John Z. DeLorean: Auto innovator had flair, infamy

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NEWARK, N.J. -- John Z. DeLorean was one of Detroit's best-known -- and most controversial -- automotive innovators. He designed Pontiac's GTO muscle car in the 1960s, then left Detroit to launch his own car company, one of just a handful of U.S. entrepreneurs to undertake such a challenge in the past 75 years.

The radically futuristic, gull-winged car he produced, the DeLorean, gained worldwide recognition as the time machine in the "Back to the Future" films.

But John DeLorean saw his car venture crash spectacularly when he was accused and later acquitted of cocaine trafficking and money laundering and of defrauding investors.

DeLorean died late Saturday at Overlook Hospital in Summit, N.J., at age 80. He had suffered a stroke late Thursday at his home in Bedminster, N.J., his family said.

"John DeLorean was one of Detroit's larger-than-life figures who secured a noteworthy place in our industry's history," GM Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Rick Wagoner said in a statement Sunday. "He made a name for himself through his talent, creativity, innovation and daring. At GM, he will always be remembered as the father of the Pontiac GTO, which really started the muscle-car craze of the '60s."

Interviewed Thursday morning by Bloomberg News, DeLorean said he had ideas on how financially strapped GM could right itself. But "they have to pay me" to find out, he joked.

DeLorean was the first of four sons of a Ford Motor Co. foundry worker. After his parents divorced, he grew up in Detroit and Los Angeles. He played saxophone and won a music scholarship to the Lawrence Institute of Technology in Detroit. But he shifted to engineering, and later earned advanced degrees in engineering and business.

He was hired as an engineer by Chrysler in 1952, though he left less than a year later to work for Packard Motor Co. When Packard was acquired by Studebaker Corp. in 1956, DeLorean took a job with the advanced engineering group at Pontiac. His patents included the recessed windshield wiper and the overhead cam engine.

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By age 40, DeLorean led Pontiac, and four years later became the youngest head of GM's giant Chevrolet division. He was credited with creating what some consider the first muscle car in 1964 by cramming a V8 engine into a Pontiac Tempest and calling it the GTO, dubbed the "Goat" by enthusiasts.

Many thought DeLorean was destined to become GM's president. He was vice president in charge of North American car and truck operations when he quit in 1973 to launch the DeLorean Motor Car Co. near Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Eight years later, the DeLorean DMC-12 hit the streets. But the factory produced only about 8,900 cars in three years. The company collapsed in 1983, a year after he was charged with conspiring to sell \$24 million of cocaine and money laundering to salvage his car venture.

DeLorean claimed entrapment and won acquittal on the charges in 1984, despite a videotape in which he called a suitcase full of cocaine "good as gold."

Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, he battled tax, fraud, racketeering and bankruptcy charges and avoided extradition to Great Britain and Switzerland to face charges of defrauding investors in his car plant. The British government lost the equivalent of \$94 million from its heavy subsidies in the plant.

He was later cleared of defrauding investors, but continuing legal battles kept him on the sidelines of the automotive world, although his passion for cars did not abate.

After declaring bankruptcy in 1999, he said he wanted to produce a speedy plastic sports car selling for only \$20,000. His fourth wife, Sally, said in a brief interview Sunday that he had designed a new sports car and still hoped to start another auto company.

Mayer Morganroth, a Southfield-based attorney who represented DeLorean from 1982 until 1993, said his former client was "probably one of the finest auto engineers in the world at the time."

Morganroth later sued DeLorean for failing to pay lawyer's fees.

"I think he was one of the great tragedies," Morganroth said. "An exceedingly bright, talented man. John was also the ultimate deceiver."

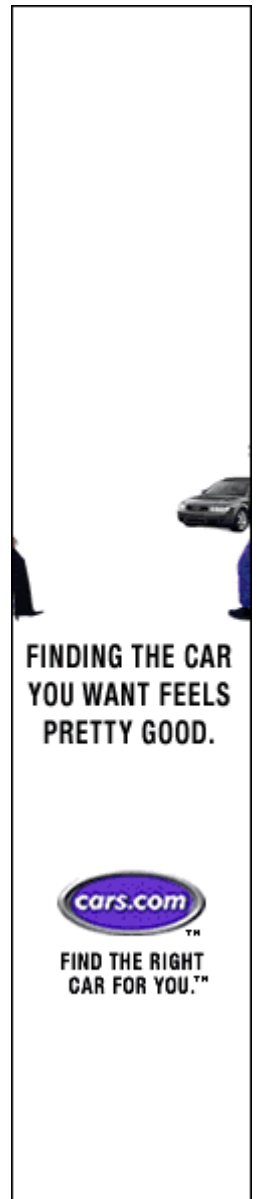
In addition to his wife, DeLorean is survived by a son, Zachary Tavio DeLorean; two daughters, Kathryn Ann DeLorean and Sheila Baldwin DeLorean; three brothers, and two grandchildren.

A public viewing will be from 2 to 8 p.m. Wednesday at A.J. Desmond & Sons Funeral Home in Royal Oak. A private burial will be Thursday at White Chapel Cemetery in Troy.


 
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