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GM Tech Center Retirees, Students Fix Up Wiegand Park

Mark Reuss, president of GM North America, was on hand to inaugurate the newly refurbished Wiegand Park in Warren Aug. 14.

The park was fixed up thanks to 10 students from Lincoln High School in Warren and five retirees from GM. They got together under GM's Student Corps program, which was launched in June.

Mike Zemmin, who retired from GM's Human Resources department, said the goal of the Student Corps program is to bring together former GM employees with local high school students looking to learn the kind of life skills that can help them get ahead.

Several high schools around metro Detroit, including Lincoln in Warren, participated in the program. The way it works, Zemmin said, is that students, along with their GM-sponsored mentors, agree on a summer project to work on. The mentors advise the students on how to accomplish the project – in this case, restoring Wiegand Park. The mentors also work with students on various life skills, such as how to interview for a job.

Reuss said he has visited all the projects by the Student Corps participants. He added that all the students have worked hard, but he has particular

attachment to Wiegand Park.

"I played softball at Wiegand Park on a GM team from the Tech Center for 20 years," Reuss said. "I must say that after all the work the students put in, the park looks just wonderful. When I see all the efforts the students and retirees put in, I couldn't be

prouder. This is where the rebuilding of Detroit starts."

Warren Parks and Recreation Director Henry Bowman said the park "hasn't looked this good in the 10 years I've worked at the parks department."

Warren Mayor Jim Fouts was on hand and said that as a former

teacher, he's proud of the students and the future looks to be in good hands.

The 10 Lincoln students cleaned and repainted the restrooms in the park, Zemmin said. They also added a new electric sensor that turns the restroom lights on and off, and painted a

mural outside the building.

"They've been working on the park since early June," Zemmin said. "They really put in a lot of work."

The 10 students are Alexis Benson, Daijae Blocton, Jordan Felix,

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GM retirees, local officials and students from Lincoln High School in Warren celebrate the reopening of Wiegand Park after a major cleanup.

A Long and Winding Road, All the Way to Cruze

The Chevy Cruze is the latest in a long line of GM small cars dating back more than 50 years.

John McElroy, a journalist covering the auto business for more than 30 years and featured writer on the web site Autoline, said the Cruze's roots go farther back than many people believe.

"GM has been building small cars for a while now," McElroy said. "Believe it or not, they made a lot of nice small cars back in the 1920s and 1930s, but they stopped in the 1940s because we tend not to like small cars. Americans are bigger than a lot of people and believe they need a bigger car."

But not all people are "big" or want a big car, McElroy said. There are some buyers out there who, even 50 years ago, cared about mileage, or wanted an affordable car.

"And some people just like small cars," McElroy said.

So to meet that niche, GM came out with the Corvair in 1959, McElroy said. It met with limited success. Not a failure, but it also didn't light the auto world on fire.

"With that information in mind, Detroit's reaction to the VW Beetle was to laugh," McElroy said. "That is until they saw that people were buying them. Ford came out with the Falcon, which was small for the standards of the time. Today, it would be mid-sized. Chrysler came out with the Dodge Dart."

Basically, everyone was trying to get a piece of the small car pie, McElroy said. GM even came out with the Chevy II in 1962. He said it was more like the Dart and the Falcon than the Beetle, but it "sold quite well."

But something happened that happens with every small car made – it got bigger.

"This is something I've seen with every small car, both foreign and domestic," McElroy said. "The small car gets bigger with every redesign. That's because when the manufacturer does market research, customers are asked what they want. The reply is invariably, 'I love the car, but it could use a little more leg room,' or 'it's a great car, but I could use just little bit more trunk room.'"

The result is that the next iteration of that small car model is a little bigger. He said the classic example of that size creep is the Honda Accord. When it started, it was as small as today's Honda Civic. By 1970, the Corvair was gone, McElroy said – though Ralph Nader had something to do with that. But even the Chevy II was dropped, McElroy said, "because Americans seemed to have lost their taste for small cars."

But GM didn't give up on that market niche. The company developed the Vega.

"The problem was that the Vega was a disaster," McElroy said. "It had all kinds of overheating problems and quality issues. As long as a Vega ran, it wasn't a bad car, but too many of them became unreliable."

Part of the problem, McElroy said, was that GM, in responding to the Ford Pinto, tried to do a lot with the Vega. It had an aluminum engine block that was lighter and was bolted to a cast iron head. The two metals cool at different rates, which caused a lot of problems and "GM didn't catch on until it was too late," McElroy said.



1975 Chevrolet Chevettes on display in the lobby of the former General Motors Building on West Grand Boulevard in Detroit's New Center Area.

"GM was already phasing the Vega out at the time of the first oil crisis back in 1973. GM recognized that the company needed to do something to plug the gap left by the Vega, so they looked around at what they had and saw the Chevette, which at the time was being built in Brazil and was designed in Europe."

What people have to remember, he added, was that business models and business technology were very different in 1973. Just making an international phone call was a bit of a task. There was no email, no faxes, no Internet. The Chevette was related to the Opel Kadette, which used GM's T-Car platform. It was the last Opel to feature rear-wheel drive.

"I remember when Ford wanted to combine its various individual European country operations into Ford of Europe," McElroy said. "People from Ford of

Britain, Ford of Germany, Ford of Italy were very critical. They said things like, 'Don't you know we have our own special culture that requires cars designed to meet those cultural needs?'"

So in 1973, when the Vega was "going south fast," said McElroy, GM had to come out with something and so it brought out the Chevette. It got great mileage, but was a cheap car.

"It was perfectly good for what it was, a car designed to be driven in Brazil," McElroy said. "That meant it had to be affordable for most Brazilians."

GM realized as time went on that there was a need for a vehicle with good mileage, but also with better technology, McElroy said. GM also needed a front-wheel-drive car. So they rushed the Chevy Cavalier, built on the

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Steel Task Force Develops Design For Reducing Wheel Weight

To assist automakers in manufacturing vehicles that will meet the new fuel economy regulations while also offering style to consumers, the Steel Market Development Institute's (SMDI) Wheels Task Force recently unveiled the results of its latest lightweight steel wheel project.

The group's analysis of the project talked about how the SMDI developed a new steel wheel design solution that is equivalent in mass to a comparable aluminum wheel, but at a 40 percent cost saving. SMDI is a business unit of the American Iron and Steel Institute.

"This new steel wheel design provides automakers with a great foundation for a lightweight, affordable wheel that consumers will love," said Ronald Krupitzer, vice president, automotive market, SMDI.

"With automakers looking for solutions to develop lightweighting technologies, here is another example of steel matching aluminum in mass while beating aluminum in cost. It's also a highly styled wheel that will help sell cars."

This project applied state-of-the-art concept design and analytical methods to an existing high-volume wheel to achieve an advanced lightweight design that can be adapted to various vehicle platforms, Krupitzer said.

Advanced manufacturing processes and new steel grades were used to increase the weight and cost savings potential for the wheel assembly design.

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