Back in the Spotlight

MARK J. McCOURT

A Volvo 780 Turbo show car was rescued and is being restored for a cause

BY MARK J. McCOURT • PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DAVIES OWENS

Show cars are rarely built to last. Their glamour is often superficial, contrived to sparkle appealingly under the bright lights and through camera shutters. Outside of that artificial setting, most vehicles of this type have little practical value. A special one-off 780 Turbo, commissioned by Volvo Cars of North America and brought to life by ASC for the New York International Auto Show, had the advantage of a durable Volvo at its core. Having survived decades hiding in plain sight, this once-endangered coupe is now returning to its former glory at the hands of young people and mentoring adults, with elite display inside the 2021 SEMA show as the end goal.

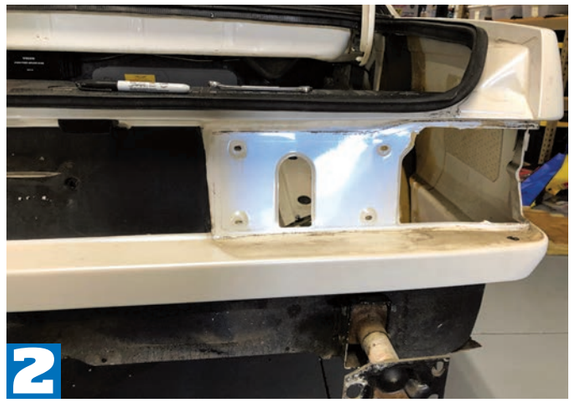
Your author first encountered the distinctive flagship in the spring of 1990; my father took me to New York City to attend the Auto Show at the Javits Center. It was a genuinely thrilling experience for a budding Volvo enthusiast to take in the Swedish automaker's vast stand, with the historic-model recreation of the famous "stack" stretching to the ceiling, and a distinctly sporty appearing 780 Bertone — normally a reserved, chrome-trimmed luxury car — standing alone on a brightly lit pedestal.

This was a special example promoting the new Generation 3 Turbo four-cylinder engine and "Prototype Body Styling Concept" bodywork, as the attendant signage explained, the latter adding a serious dose of contemporary monochromatic style set off with a pop of teal striping.

Davies Owens, the world's foremost Volvo 780 Bertone historian and keeper of the 780 registry for the Volvo Club of America, first encountered this singular 780 Turbo 13 years later in California, where it was for sale by its initial private owner, a woman who'd purchased the then-652-mile car in 1997 from Volvo Cars of North America in New Jersey. It had been driven around 33,000 miles by 2003, and her $32,000 asking price, combined with its limited-to-exterior customization, left him to walk away. The Turin, Italy-built two-door would go through four additional owners over the next 14 years and 110,000 miles, and be rescued just before it was scheduled to be scrapped to recoup impound fees.

In a circle of fate, our feature car finally landed in Davies' sympathetic hands. Through dedicated sleuthing, he'd tracked down the car... purchased it out of impound;

This once-spectacular coupe was abandoned in an impound yard in 2017, with fees piling up, when the keeper of the Volvo 780 Bertone register found it and negotiated its release. A friend drove it from California to Idaho.



1. The restoration of this car began in earnest in early 2020. Removing the passenger door fiberglass body panel revealed old glue and corroded raw steel brackets, but thankfully little body rust. This 780 had been built for indoor show display, with no consideration given to life in the real world. **2.** Hidden behind a taillamp was an exciting discovery: a perfect, never-faded, undamaged area of original pearlescent paint that was applied by ASC some 30 years earlier; this will be matched, using modern materials and techniques, during the body restoration. **3.** Working in Davies' well-equipped detached shop that includes a four-post lift, the Rebuilding Generations volunteer crew readied this car's 140,000-mile, Turbo +-equipped 2.3-liter "red block" four-cylinder engine and automatic transmission for removal. It will be replaced with a newer, more-powerful engine and manual gearbox.

4. As part of the performance upgrades planned for the 780 Turbo, Davies has elected to substitute virtually the entire wiring harness of this 1989 model for one from his one-year-newer donor car as part of exchanging the original Bosch LH2.2 engine management system for the more-sophisticated and tunable LH2.4 that debuted for the 1990 model year. Here, volunteer Steve Lawrence traced and tagged each wire before removing the massive dashboard harness. **5.** Glen Burman, a welder by trade, spent six hours fabricating custom brackets that would join the 780's unit-body frame rails to the rotisserie. That implement has proven essential in the multitude of tasks requiring easy underbody access. **6.** This Volvo's complex, coil-sprung multi-link independent rear suspension was removed as a unit with the rear differential. Visible on the body is staining left by the untreated steel that mounted the custom panels; the restoration team hopes to create a new mounting system with brackets fabricated in lightweight, non-rusting aluminum.

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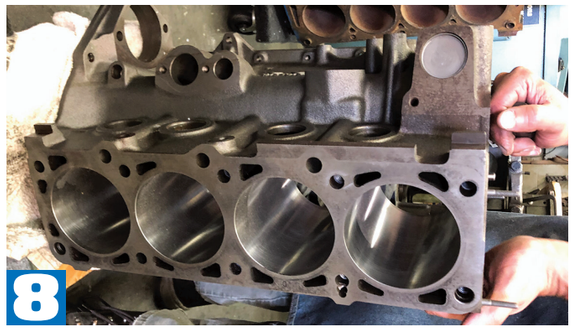
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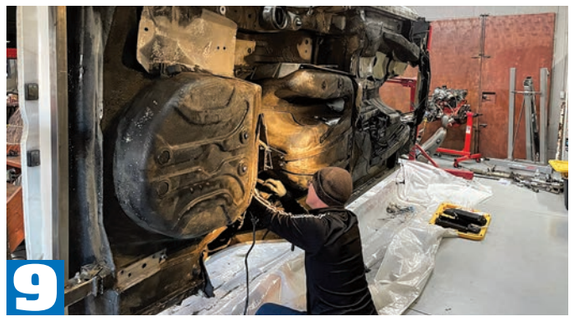
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7. The Rebuilding Generations volunteer group divided and conquered, with members in the foreground inspecting the original four-cylinder engine and readying it for removing the factory-installed AW71 four-speed automatic, which will be replaced by a rebuilt M46 manual transmission, as available in European markets. Behind them, another group cleaned the calipers of the four-wheel-disc braking system. 8. Volvo strengthened its four-cylinder turbo engine in its final iteration, adding oil squirters for improved piston cooling. This 1993 "L"-block will soon be assembled using oversized Mahle pistons and an IPD performance camshaft. When finished, it will be a blend of the best components the company offered in that period. 9. The rotisserie made tasks like removing the fuel tank and lines, brake lines, and cleaning years of accumulated oil residue and undercoating much less of a backache.

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10. Davies' son Liam worked with volunteer Brandon to replace the badly worn bushings that secure the cosmetically restored rear differential in place. 11. For a time, the Owens family workshop housed a makeshift paint booth, created by draping plastic sheeting over a tubular frame that enclosed the entire rotisserie and covered the floor below; floor-height fans drew fresh air through. Liam wore a full suit, eye protection, and a respirator as he sprayed individual suspension and driveline components with fresh chassis-black paint. The car was masked, exhaust heat shields covered, and its entire undercarriage got fresh undercoating. 12. Carrozzeria Bertone fitted each of the 8,951 780 coupes it built for Volvo with a matched set of six burled elm dash and door trims; sadly this car's driver's door piece is missing. Bill March, a friend who restores wood, volunteered to recondition the remainders, methodically stripping the old, cracked glossy urethane finish and replacing it with a satin finish that recalls what was used on 1990-'91 models.

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Davies tells that wild tale at 780coupe.com/concept. His friend Todd drove the battered 780 to the Owens family home in Idaho, where this one-time dream machine's original, custom-fitted 17-inch alloy wheels — sold separately out of Volvo's corporate warehouse decades earlier — already resided. I got the chance to visit Davies and see this now-140,000-mile coupe a second time, 27 years after my first experience, while the car's new caretaker pondered its future possibilities.

"What I find fascinating as an automotive enthusiast is there are so many niche moments in history that are overlooked because the stories were never told," he muses. "This car represents an odd time where the Swedes built a car in Italy for the Americans. When the 780 reached the U.S. in 1987, Volvo was doing well selling lots of 240s and wagons, and along came this two-door that cost $15,000 more than the most expensive standard model — it was a foray into the luxury coupe market, playing with the German big boys. But the 780 was slow to arrive, had a fairly tepid PRV V-6 engine, dealers didn't receive it warmly, and it just didn't fit the company's average customer demographics. A lot of times, 780s were deeply discounted for sale, and technicians grimaced every time one rolled in for service because so many components were different than in other models.

This photo of our feature car in primer, taken in 1989 at ASC, was a thrilling discovery from retired 780 technical project leader Sven-Gunnar Johansson; it was among a handful of original slides sent from VCNA to Sweden.

"In the U.S., Volvo struggled with how to market this car that really wasn't all that exciting," Davies continues. "VCNA had proposed some modifications to the team in Sweden — body-color bumpers, changing the wheels — but they weren't receptive." Volvo had recently introduced the 'Turbo +' software enhancement that was available as an accessory on four-cylinder turbo-charged models and standard equipment on the new-for-'89 780 Turbo, and this, coupled with the third generation of intercooled SOHC 2.3-liter engine introduced for 1990, meant 188 hp: then, the highest output in the company's history! Our historian explains that the U.S. arm of Volvo Cars spotted its opportunity to take advantage of this fresh performance technology: "They shipped this 780 off to ASC. They were trying to add pizzaz to an underappreciated vehicle. It's a great testimony to the American market trying to do something different."

And that's how the New York show car came to be. It was a standard white-over-beige 1989 780 Turbo that received extensive cosmetic modifications from the custom-build experts at ASC in Michigan, with total project cost conservatively

780 Bertone historian Davies Owens posed with son Bennett and volunteers Steve and Ashton Lawrence on the day the original engine was removed. Davies snapped this photo of the Turbo reunited with the 17-inch alloys it wore during the 1990 NYIAS. Tinted windows protected the leather seats, which will be re-dyed and join new carpet.

estimated at $100,000. Through his historic research, Davies would come to know David Sheinberg, the Volvo employee once tasked by VCNA's project planning head and marketing vice president with overseeing the project that would culminate in the memorable display I witnessed in 1990. An ASC stylist named Oluf Bendixen had created renderings showing the car sporting aerodynamic-looking lower body fairings and a subtle trunk spoiler, and this design was approved by VCNA, with somewhat-grudging acceptance from the 780 team in Sweden. Sheinberg would fly between New Jersey and Michigan, carrying in-progress documentation showing the clay modeling, the installation of hand-formed fiberglass panels created from molds made from the clay, and the complex multi-step painting process that resulted in the incredible pearl white paint that popped under the lights.

Sadly, by the time this 780 Turbo was parked in Davies' driveway, it was a shadow of its former self. Since it was built for indoor display, no consideration was given to weather resistance, and the special body parts were attached to the zinc-treated sheetmetal using raw steel brackets and fasteners that badly rusted from exposure to coastal sea air. Major portions of the fiberglass front spoiler were broken off below the bumper and the remainder was supported by zip ties. The cladding on the driver's door was missing and its passenger's-door counterpart had been crudely reaffixed with screws. Extensive rust had formed atop the windshield and at the top and bottom of the rear window. Inside, the entire driver's door panel was gone, and with it one of six Italian burled elm trim pieces unique to this car. As Davies and I stood in his driveway in the fall of 2017, looking at the car, he confided that he didn't know what he would do with his prize. He was contemplating salvaging the specific parts and putting them on a more solid donor 780, and perhaps even questioning his sanity for taking on such a project.

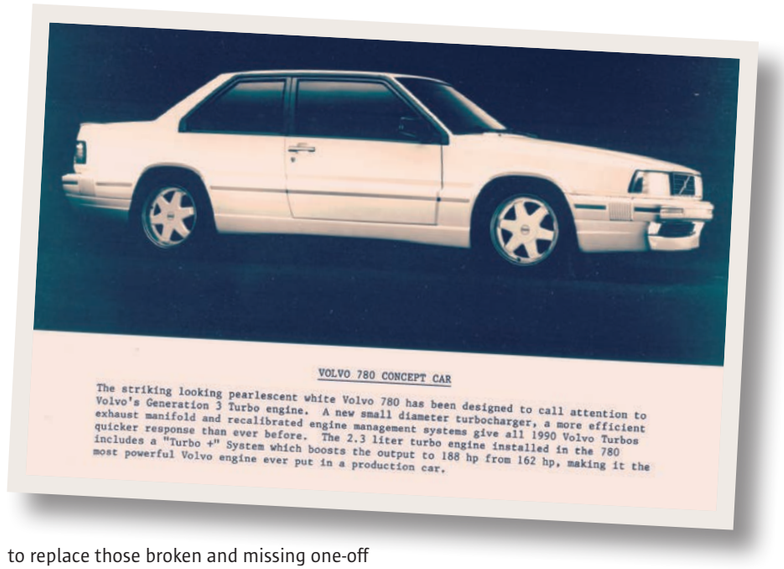
Time would pass, but a breakthrough was on the horizon in the form of Rebuilding Generations (rebuildinggenerations.com), a nonprofit charitable organization established in 2013 that provides automotive-focused mentorship for children and young adults, ages 7 and up. This group is affiliated with the Specialty Equipment Market Association through founder Kevin Keep, who has a 23-year relationship with the industry through his day job handling marketing for many of the aftermarket automotive industry leaders. Rebuilding Generations has since worked on several automotive projects that have been highlighted in Optima's outdoor display area during the annual SEMA show in Las Vegas. In the spring of 2020, this special Volvo would be adopted as the latest project for the group of knowledgeable adult mentors and young enthusiasts to tackle together, with the goal of displaying in Optima's booth, this fall.

As Davies surmised, restoring this 32-year-old Italo-Swede would not be a simple or inexpensive operation. And while it may surprise purists, the 780 historian is taking a few liberties, opting for era-correct original-equipment modifications to the engine and transmission that involve more than simple parts swaps. He's actually having a new, overbored four-cylinder built using the strongest, final iteration of that B230FT "red block," which will be mated to an updated Bosch engine management system that can be chip tuned for improved performance. And rather than reinstalling the four-speed automatic transmission used in all U.S.-market 780s, the team will mate the more-powerful engine to a rebuilt M46 four-speed manual with electric overdrive that Davies sourced from a $180 1990 740 Turbo that he pulled from a rural Idaho field; this isn't a stretch, since the 780 was available with three pedals in overseas markets.

The Bertone coupe's outward appearance will remain true to its history, though. Davies learned from a Rebuilding Generations mentor who owns a professional glass shop that the rust issues in the car's roof skin more than likely originated from ASC workers slicing through the original window seals — also cutting through the paint, primer, and into sheetmetal below — to remove the glass in advance of the 780's repaint. That damage wasn't repaired before the glass was reinstalled, and moisture got into the channels and ruined the metal from below. The solution? Removing this skin and replacing it with one from a donor 780 in the correct, spot-welded fashion.

More complicated questions remain: How to replace those broken and missing one-off lower body panels, and how to match the old pearlescent finish? Davies is seeking advice about the possibility of 3D-printing replacement panels, with the alternative being recreating ASC's handiwork with fiberglass and lighter, rustproof aluminum brackets. He'd like to be able to offer the show car's body kit, or at least its trunk spoiler, to other 780 enthusiasts around the globe. And it will take serious consulting with automotive paint professionals to reproduce the blue-tinted white finish in today's materials.

"Getting this car felt like adopting the puppy from the pound who'd been out on the streets for a month — the scrappy dirty dog. It was literally weeks away from being crushed," he recalls with a smile. "Now we're on a really exciting journey, and SEMA has lit a fire."



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