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Illiana Hummer Club member Joanne Gerhart stands beside her Hummer H2. Her family owns three Hummers.

Hummer devotees cling to hope that brand will survive

BY JOEL HOOD

CHICAGO — Mark Price's candy-red Hummer H1 has a 6.5-litre turbo diesel engine, 40-inch tires, shortwave radio and a front-mounted winch that could tow an ordinary SUV out of a ravine — so, yeah, you could say he's prepared for just about anything.

Except for the demise of the Hummer brand.

"Out of the box, off the showroom floor, you cannot touch this truck," Price said above the vehicle's idling growl. "You won't find any other vehicle like this. The hood is fiberglass. The body is all aircraft aluminum, held together with rivets and glue. ... It can outperform anything."

Few vehicles in American history are as fiercely derided and defended as the Hummer, the alpha male's uber-car that gained popularity in the early 1990s in the upsurge of U.S. patriotism surrounding Desert Storm. The Hummer was big and boxy and safe, and — albeit a notorious gas guzzler — it set a new standard for American engineering and off-road capabilities.

By the mid 2000s, though, in an era of soaring gas prices and increased environmental awareness, the Hummer's popularity waned and it came to symbolize the excess and me-first indulgence many despised.

Now that General Motors' efforts to sell the iconic Hummer brand have failed, and a new buyer has yet to surface, Hummer owners who've long endured scorn and evil stares from passing motorists fear their days are numbered.

"We're an easy target. It's easy to bash the guy who drives a Hummer," said Price, who 10 years ago founded a regional Hummer club that has more than 100 members in the Chicago area. "Part of that is that these vehicles stand out. We're not sneaking up on anybody."

Perhaps nowhere is the passion for Hummer more evident than in northern Indiana, where a small South Bend, Ind., company 30 years ago sought to build the best off-road vehicles ever made. The AM General plant in nearby Mishawaka, Ind., not only built the original military vehicles but also the civilian models until General Motors bought the brand in 1999.

This part of Indiana is still Hummer country, owners say, and many still speak of the company as if it were a small mom-and-pop that made it big.

"Not only can you say you own an American-made truck, but you can say you've got an Indianan," said JoAnne Gerhart, whose family owns three Hummers. "It's a real source of pride for us out here, and it should be."

And that pride comes from using their Hummers for what they were built for, Price said. The Illiana Hummer Club he founded and other Hummer clubs around the United States have become like volunteer emergency response units. His group works with police and fire departments in the Chicago area.

The club has rescued motorists stranded by the side of road on snowy, winter nights. After record-breaking rain in the fall of 2008, the Hummers drove firefighters into the rising flood water to pull people and pets out of their homes. After a university student went missing in 2007, the Hummer team rescued an official search and rescue unit, including a horse and an all-terrain-vehicle, that had fallen over an embankment.

"In bad weather we can get called out by the police department, the fire department, and the places they can't go to, we'll go in and pull people out," said Hummer club member Lennie Pulliam. "We're ordinary people, too; we just like doing things to help others."

The original Humvees that hit the market in 1992 were so similar to the vehicles protecting American troops in the Middle East that they seemed out of place on U.S. roads and highways. And they came with a price tag (from \$40,000 US to more than \$100,000) that placed them in the luxury sports-car market.

Over the last decade, as GM tried to attract a wider audience, the Hummer evolved and slimmed down. The H2 and H3 models, while still dwarfing most trucks and SUVs, maintained the military bloodlines but became popular among suburban soccer moms and hockey dads who did little in them but run errands around town. Tricked-out models became coveted by rap stars and professional athletes.

Hummer's marketing push evolved the same way, pushing aside the vehicle's off-road prowess in favour of its safety and comfort, said Nick Richards, a company spokesperson.

"It essentially became like a fashion statement," Richards said. "And when that happens, you've always got to be ready for some backlash."

The backlash hit while GM was in financial turmoil, Richards said, and the company had few resources to defend itself. Sales plummeted; the Hummer line, which sold more than 80,000 vehicles globally in 2006, sold fewer than 15,000 in 2009.

With the future of the brand in doubt, the Illiana Hummer Club is spreading goodwill in its communities. The members have led food drives and raised money for children with autism. This summer they'll participate in several parades and make their annual pilgrimage to a camp for children battling cancer.

"To see the look on the kids' faces when we roll up and ask them if they want to go for a ride — it's priceless," Pulliam said.

If these are, indeed, the final days of Hummer, Price said, it'll be a sad end to an American brand that was different from the onset.

"A person who views a vehicle as a mode of transportation, to get from A to B, is not going to understand the Hummer brand. They never will," said Price.

"Once you get past the stereotypes, the persona, you realize how special these vehicles are."

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