

Chapter 1

The Firebird: A Childhood Dream

Barbara Gesaman was having a devil of a time making her sculpture for art class at Crary Junior High in Waterford Township, Michigan. There were toothpicks and glue, and she couldn't get them to stick together, let alone stand up into a three-dimensional structure.

Then she looked across the room to discover whether her classmates were doing any better. She wanted to see in particular how one girl was doing, the one who always built the best projects and who was in the corps of assistants who helped the science teachers in their labs.

Sure enough, her structure was impressive. "It was some kind of Ferris wheel," says Gesaman, who remained a friend through high school. "She had a great sense of spatial relationships. I think she was already an engineer."

The girl was Mary Makela. The daughter of Ray Makela, a long-time worker at General Motors, and Eva Makela, née Pyykkonen, a

bookkeeper, Mary excelled in school. “I liked math and science, and they encouraged me to pursue that,” says Mary, now Mary Barra. Her parents, both of Finnish ancestry, had grown up in the Great Depression. “They learned a lot and both had a lot of life struggles by growing up in that time,” she says.

Neither parent went to college. Eva Makela attended a two-year associates program to become a bookkeeper, while Ray followed the skilled-tradesman process to become a journeyman die maker. He worked for General Motors Corporation in nearby Pontiac, as did many of the breadwinners in Waterford at that time. Eva valued education and insisted that her children, Mary and older brother Paul, attend college no matter what.

A community of modest-sized but well-kept homes, Waterford Township is dotted with an archipelago of 34 small lakes. In the short Michigan summers, local children rode their bikes down the town’s shady streets to the homes of friends who lived on Watkins Lake or Elizabeth Lake, where they swam, glided in small sailboats, or hung out on the sandy shores.

The bucolic life contrasted with political strife taking place in the 1960s and 1970s. The 1967 riots in Detroit had sent many white families fleeing to the suburbs, and a similar pattern took place in Pontiac, about 30 miles to the northwest. The city’s population had surged as African Americans, many from the South, flocked there from the 1920s onward to seek work in the auto industry. Pontiac reached a peak population of 85,000 people in 1970 and housed several auto plants, including the Pontiac Motor factory where Ray Makela worked. So many white families settled in suburban Waterford Township, about seven miles from Pontiac, that it became known locally as “white Waterford.”

In the early 1970s, Detroit, backed by regional courts, began trying to integrate its schools by busing. Local officials argued that the city’s own school district had become so racially segregated that it needed to bus in white students from outlying suburban school districts in order to integrate the schools—a decision that upset many suburban parents who had fled the city. In 1971, a branch of the Ku Klux Klan dynamited 10 school buses in Pontiac rather than have them be used for integration.¹ The Detroit busing plan eventually was appealed to the U.S. Supreme

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Court as *Milliken v. Bradley*. The court ruled against busing by a 5 to 4 margin in 1974, a crushing blow to integration efforts. A quarter century later, Waterford was still 93 percent white.²

In Waterford, a factory worker without a college degree could afford a home with a yard, perhaps a small boat, and of course a car. A strong economy at the time kept GM's Pontiac Motor plant humming, and overtime fattened paychecks.

"My whole life growing up, I can't remember my father ever not being at work," Barra says, unlike later years when furloughs of autoworkers were regular events as foreign competitors cut into market share. "He worked a lot of overtime. The company was crunching out new models and the dies were changing each time you did that."

Had he been born in a different time, Ray Makela would have become an engineer rather than a factory hand, Barra says. Instead, he worked for 39 years as a die maker and was a member of the United Auto Workers union. Making dies is one of the more complex tasks in manufacturing, requiring a high degree of skill. Dies are tools used for shaping components of manufactured products, mostly using a press. Like a mold, the die needs to be customized to the product it is making. Dies have to be extremely precise; at times they can deviate from specifications by no more than one-thousandth of one inch. The trade requires years of either on-the-job training or a combination of trade school and apprenticeship.

Makela was a natural tinkerer. He had a workshop in his basement where he made things in his spare time or fixed household appliances. "It was a time when everyone fixed their own car, and changed their own oil," Barra recalls. "He did all that." Barra's older brother Paul did most of the dirty work, while she helped her mother with household chores. When she was done, she was allowed to work beside her father, whom she remembers taking apart a curling iron of hers that had gone on the blink.

Sometimes he brought home new cars from the Pontiac factory, which she was allowed to explore. "That was a big part of my life growing up, being excited about new cars," she says. She recalls an older cousin who had a Pontiac Firebird convertible, red with a white top. "I remember seeing it and loving it when I was 10 or 11 years old," she says.

Every year, the local car dealers would paper over their windows in the fall, when the next year's new models were coming out. The whole family got to see the unveiling when the new models were shown.

While her father supported her interest in science and fueled her curiosity about cars, Barra credits her mother, Eva, with pushing her to academic excellence. "My mom became very passionate about education," she says. Eva Makela wanted the next generation of her family to have the educational opportunities she had missed in her own life—it didn't matter what you studied, just that you did study. Over and over, she said, "You're going to college," not just to her own two children, but to those of her seven siblings.

Mrs. Makela, who was also a skilled seamstress, didn't care what career path her children followed, as long as they graduated from college and worked hard at whatever they did. "Working hard was important," Barra says. "You worked before you played. It was instrumental."

Barra's brother, Paul Makela, also heeded his mother's advice. After earning both his undergraduate and medical degrees at Detroit's Wayne State University, Makela is now a gynecological surgeon in the Detroit suburbs, where he performs state-of-the-art operations using robotic tools and computers.

At Waterford Mott High School, Mary was smart, but not a nerd. She was friendly and well-liked. She wore her brown hair in the shoulder-length, Farrah Fawcett style cut of the times, with looping curls at the side. She had glasses with large, round frames, and a warm smile. Classmates who remember her say she had an ability to talk to everybody, whether they were boys in the auto shop class or the kids with the high IQs who took physics and calculus. Mary was a member of the latter group: Her graduating class in 1980 had 10 students who earned a perfect 4.0 grade point average, and she was one of them.

In the late 1970s, while the country was recovering from the end of the Vietnam era and Watergate, life in Waterford harked back to an earlier era. A typical after-school activity might be heading across the street from the high school to the corner of Pontiac Lake and Scott Lake Road for soft-serve ice cream at Custard Corner or to the Big Boy on Dixie Highway. On weekends, kids went to one of several local cinemas, roller-skating at the Rolladium, or bowling at the 300 Bowl. They also hung out at the Pontiac Mall, later called the Summit Place Mall.

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Mary Barra stayed away from the house parties that were often held on weekends, where drinking and other typical teen transgressions took place, said one former classmate. She was close friends with a cheerleader, Lisa Christos, who was part of the squad that was ranked eighth in the nation. Christos defied the cheerleader stereotypes: Like Mary, she was a member of the National Honor Society, and was one of the 10 students with a 4.0 grade point average.

Mary followed her parents' lead and work ethic, earning extra money at Felice's Quality Market, a grocery store in nearby Pontiac. "It was a nice family place," she recalls, chuckling at its slogan, "Where 'quality' is our middle name."

The summer before senior year, she attended a camp where she learned the skills she'd need the following year as she took on her first managerial assignment: coeditor of the school yearbook, *Polaris*. She learned how to size and crop photos, balance the different elements in a page layout, and edit articles.

That's where classmates first got a hint of her potential future as a manager. The yearbook was a huge project: The editors had to manage the deadlines throughout the school year, and get staffers to comply with them. There were a lot of different personalities. Though Mary shared the job with her classmate Barbara Gesaman, there was little doubt who was in charge. "She took the lead," Gesaman says. The biggest challenge was the photographers, she remembers. You'd have to be sure that they would actually attend the games that they said they were going to see, sometimes more than one in an evening, and then select photos that were of publication quality.

Eric Stileski, one of the photo staff, recalls Mary being extremely organized and businesslike, portioning out the assignments and making the photographers aware that if they agreed to cover an event, they'd be expected to deliver.

"She'd say, 'Okay, so you are going to do this, right?'" Stileski recalls. Then when he brought back the pictures, there were meetings to go over the prints and decide which ones would be used. "I would point out which ones I liked, and why," he said. When there were disagreements, "she was the one who decided."

There was little drama, Stileski says, even if it felt strange to take orders from a classmate. Gesaman says Mary got the staff to pull together

as a team—a skill that she would repeatedly be cited for throughout her later career. She'd say, "Okay, we've got to get this done by a certain deadline. Can you take care of this part, and can you do that?" She worked hard, and expected others to do the same.

Barra's sense of humor—not often apparent in her public appearances today, where she can be stiff and resort to business school jargon—shows throughout the yearbook, with jokey captions and photos of classmates. The winners of the school spirit award are shown swapping genders, with the boy wearing a cheerleader's skirt and the girl in football shoulder pads. Gesaman, voted most valuable to the class, is shown absconding with a box labeled "class funds." Mary didn't spare herself from the good-natured skewering. Voted the girl most likely to succeed, she posed with her male counterpart, Mark Adamczyk, for the yearbook next to a cutout posterboard that made it look like both of them were wearing only barrels and suspenders and on their way to the poorhouse.

In Mary's senior year, she decided to attend Michigan State University and major in math, her favorite subject. She had even chosen a roommate. Only months before school was to start, a classmate told her about another option, a school called General Motors Institute (GMI), based in Flint. She was amazed to find that with GMI's cooperative program, she could study, get work experience, and pay for her schooling with the wages she earned. "I wasn't sure how I was going to pay for school," she says. "My parents had saved for the first year, but [GMI] seemed very attractive to me because I could pay my own way. Knowing my dad had just retired and my mom was working part-time, it seemed the responsible thing to do."

So, when she told classmate Kent Land that she was going to work in a Pontiac plant after high school, he could barely believe it. "I was shocked," says Land, a former yearbook staffer who is now married to Barbara Gesaman. "Working in a plant? I thought she'd be doing something more than that." Then Mary explained that she would be a line worker for only a short while, so that she could learn how cars were made. She was going to become an engineer, and ultimately, she'd be running the place.

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Notes

1. Associated Press, “Six Michigan Klansmen Arrested in Pontiac School Bus Shootings,” *Washington (PA) Observer-Reporter*, September 10, 1971, A5.
2. www.twp.waterford.mi.us/Departments/Development-Services/Community-Planning-and-Development/PDF/WaterfordTwpCensus2000Info.aspx.

