

GSM 50TH ISSUE

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Valkyrie Racing & Valkyrie Gives

A Q & A with Garage Style Magazine

TEXT BY STEVE KITTRELL | IMAGES COURTESY OF VALKYRIE RACING



It has been a long and curious road for endurance racer and philanthropist, Rene Brinkerhoff, and her crew. Countless flights, miles, fuel, and smiles. Victories, breakdowns, main drags, and backroads. A newly kindled attraction to a Porsche 356 A Coupe lead to enough adventure to bookend a lifetime. I'm a strong believer in cause-and-effect as it pertains to effort, and Valkyrie Racing has pushed themselves to the limit to bring about change.

When we spoke on the phone, Rene although obviously fighting through a winter cold, still depicted a passion for motorsports that resonated with authenticity. This wasn't for show or fame or any superficial purpose. The tuning fork in her body was struck, at the age of 57, which told her it was her time to get behind the wheel and rediscover herself, and in turn unearth destinations not yet seen by many, specifically a Porsche 356.

More importantly is the topic of child endangerment, abduction, slavery, and basic human rights. Her philanthropic arm, Valkyrie Gives, places a spotlight on some of the darkest corners of human trafficking and offers proactive methods on how to reduce the activity while heightening the awareness.

Six races, seven continents, 16 countries, and 20,000 miles – this is quite the journey so far. How did it all begin?

A: Having raced the dangerous La Carrera Panamericana (LCP) four times and finding success each year with a place on the podium, we were looking for new challenges for the car and team. Additionally, with our success at racing and my being an anomaly (an older woman who started racing in her late 50s in the notorious La Carrera Panamericana), we found we had a “voice” – people wanted to hear our story. We realized we could use that newfound voice to share our passion to fight child trafficking.

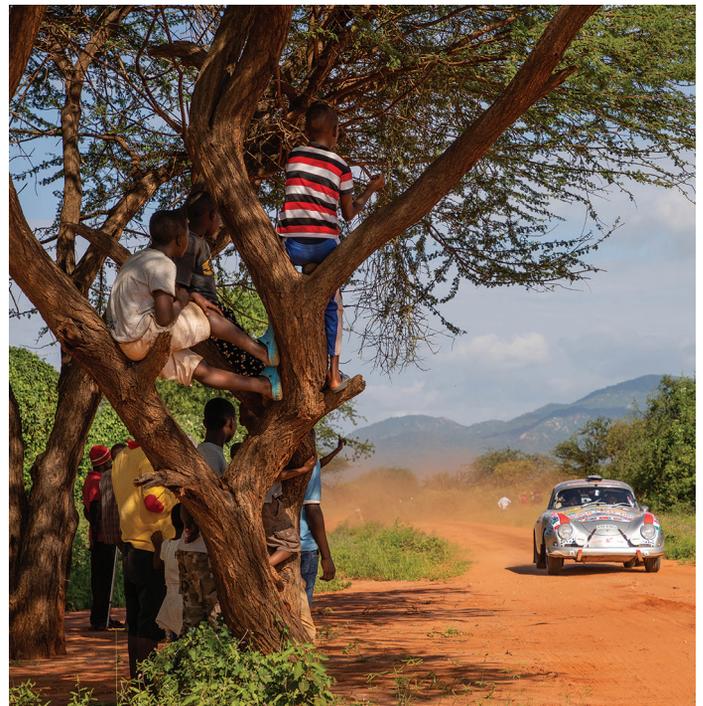
What's your connection to the Porsche 356? Is it about this particular car, or just classic racecars in general?

A: When I decided to start racing, I needed to find a car. A relative who had recently purchased a 356 with the intent to restore it, invited me to come and see it. It was my first introduction to the Porsche 356 model and I immediately knew that this was the car for me. I loved the shape and its big curves, the historicity, and feeling of nostalgia it evoked; its simple, elegant dash, the lack of modern comforts, and “save me” features.

I do love cars from the '50s and '60s, but there is something very special for me about this car in particular. My first car was a late 1960s souped-up VW bug, silver with pinstriping. The 356's sound, and the way it felt when driving hearkened back to the fun I had in my teens and the first fun days of driving. I had an immediate connection with the car. Not to mention, the car and I are the same age.

Talk to me a little about your first race at the La Carrera Panamericana. Not only was this your first race, ever, but you also made it a historic one.

A: It was my first race in the LCP in my car. We didn't have time to finish developing the car and we didn't have time to test it. It went on the trailer late on the evening before the team had to leave for Mexico. When we arrived in Mexico, I told our newly formed team that the race was going to be my driving school. I was going to have to learn by doing and hoped to make them proud. The evening of our first day of racing, they announced we had made history as a woman-driven team – we were first in our class...and it was our debut race.





LCP became our entry into creating “Project 356 World Rally Tour” – a global quest that included traversing roads around the world, some as high as 16,000 ft off-road in the Peruvian Andes, where nearly all had never seen the likes of a Porsche 356. Equally important was our participation in the 36-day 2019 Peking-to-Paris off-road endurance rally covering 9,000 miles, 8 time zones and 12 countries – the feat allowed us to make stops in China, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Russia, to provide support and funds at pre-vetted international organizations, helping women and children at risk.

Now that you are on the verge of making another type of history, preparing to conquer the final seventh continent and the challenge of a final 356 miles on ice, have you been flooded with emotions and memories of getting to this point?

A: I think the emotions and memories will be reflected on when we finish our goal. Right now, and throughout this journey, the planning, logistics, and everything else that goes into doing these immensely difficult races, has been in the forefront of all our thoughts.

You’re only as successful as the team around you. How have your support staff gotten you through all these races?

A: Our team has been absolutely instrumental in all our successes – from our car builders, to the navigators, mechanics, support crew, and familial support. Nothing could have been achieved without them. From the beginning, we’ve been aligned with Richard Tuthill and his UK team – they are the world’s leading Porsche 911 rally workshop and have been

dedicated and passionate about everything we’ve done and have gone beyond and above what would normally be seen. Going without sleep at night to fix a broken car, to servicing the car in the middle of a race enduring the extreme body stresses at 16,000 feet. The stories are numerous. Not to mention my family’s support which has been amazing. They have stood with us even while questioning the risk and danger we are exposed to.

What has it been like having both of your daughters on your side during this, and how did they react to you first telling them of your plans?

A: My daughters were surprised as was everyone in the family when I mentioned I was going to race. Since the initial discussions, they have been 100 percent supportive. Unlike the men in our family, they have expressed fewer concerns with the related dangers of racing. My youngest daughter, Christina, has been with the team from the first LCP and in every race but two, photographing or videoing. Beginning in November 2018, Christina began working for Valkyrie Racing full time, managing all media and operations. She is also an integral part of Valkyrie Gives.

My oldest daughter, Juliette, has traveled with the team and family as a spectator in most of our races, and in our most recent race last November, the East African Safari Classic Rally, she navigated for me. This was her first time as a navigator, and it was very special having her at my side. She did a fantastic job especially under extreme pressure with unique topography,



grow in length before you.

This automobile has been an instrument of change for you. How has Valkyrie Gives has been able to help so many children around the world?

A: The monies we have given have been used to educate, train, rescue, and restore victims of this crime. I have personally been involved in identifying children being trafficked and gathering evidence to make convictions against the perpetrators.

Through education about child trafficking we are preventing further children from becoming victims. By speaking and raising awareness, we have empowered others to become involved in this fight. We have supported groups that give victims an opportunity to take back their lives and follow their dreams – a chance to start their life over. Every situation is different and evaluated. Some are reunited with their families. Some are taught new job skills. All are given counseling. Our efforts and impact are growing, and we are blessed to have this privilege to help.

Finish your own sentence that has propelled you into the cockpit of this Porsche 356 A Coupe – “One day I’m going to _____”

A: ...race a car. That’s what I subconsciously told myself for over 30 years.

How have people around the world reacted to your car, your story, your mission?

A: We’ve had great enthusiasm everywhere we’ve been. Many countries where we’ve raced have never seen a 356 before, and often they’ve never seen a woman driver. The sight and sound of the Peruvian people yelling Porsche in the distance and then seeing their clapping hands and cheering voices.

Since we are an oddity we are given many opportunities to share why we race, which has created more awareness for the problem of child trafficking. Additionally, we’ve given funds to vetted charities in most of the countries we’ve traversed. It’s not uncommon to find a crowd of women of all ages waiting for us when we arrive at the end of a long day. They are inspired by what we are doing and have sincere thanks for giving a place for women in a man’s sport. | GSM

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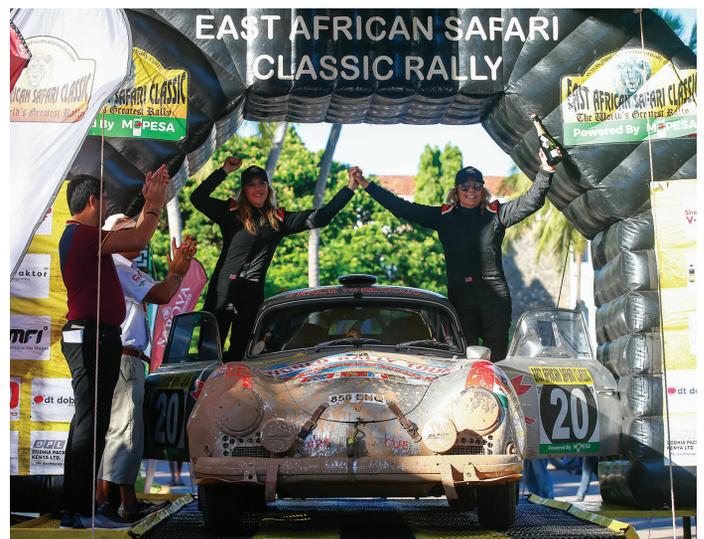
and we worked well together when presented with the many challenges of the East African roads. Juliette has also been involved with Valkyrie Racing’s efforts to fight child trafficking.

You must have had moments of doubt during all of this. Tell me about a moment where everything stopped, and you were forced to put everything into focus.

A: Our crash in 2015 was a big moment to stop and reevaluate. Not only did the car have to be rebuilt, my confidence was also broken. Everything we had accomplished and how we had gotten there was revisited. Why we raced and why we took on the dangers of the LCP, was thought over again. After the soul searching and mental machinations, I knew I was right where I was meant to be – behind the wheel of my 356 taking it places and doing things others didn’t dare to do. Later I learned the cause of the crash was mechanical, but my lack of seat time and experience meant I wasn’t equipped to adjust for the problem which could have prevented our crash.

What’s been the most challenging stretch of road you have faced and why was it so difficult?

A: The roads of East Africa presented the most difficult terrain to drive. The year we participated, 2019, was the rainiest in 20 years and the route chosen for its challenges became roads that were “off the charts.” The mud and sand with all its variations. Many stretches were so thick with muddy ruts and water, which were then followed by deep sand that seemed to



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