

# Banksville's Pray Achievement Center Inspires Students Toward Success

By Martin Wilbur

Steer into the long driveway at 16 Bedford-Banksville Rd. and there's an impressive, well-kempt property with three white houses.

There are no visible markings on the structures set back a few hundred feet from the road, but behind the walls is the story of a special man.

The Banksville property is home to the Malcolm Pray Achievement Center, a nonprofit organization established by Pray, a highly successful Greenwich, Conn. car dealership owner, after he retired in 1999. In its two garages, Pray's collection of roughly 40 classic cars are housed and the center can easily pass for an automotive museum. There's a 1909 Model T Ford, a 1934 Packard and a 1945 Lincoln Continental, among the several dozen cars, along with extensive memorabilia.

Of greater importance is the center's mission: inspire young people to set goals and pursue their dreams through timeless core principles of honesty, integrity and reputation, said Marikay Satryano, the center's executive director. It is how Pray lived his life and achieved much of his success.

"I think there's this fundamental thing about your community, about your country that says somebody's got to inspire them," Satryano said. "Somebody did it for me, I want to do it for someone else. You've got a guy like Malcolm who swept the showroom floor and then put his name over the door."

Although Pray died in 2013 at 84 years old after complications from a stroke, the work that he started at the center mentoring young people continues. Satryano said since its opening in 2001, when Pray would personally greet many of the students, and members of youth groups and other organizations who arrived at the site, an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 students have taken the tour.

The center is operated by the Pray Family Foundation, which includes his three daughters. Visitors arrive in the main house, with a classic MG parked in the living room, and are introduced to Pray through a short video. Above the flat screen television hangs a phrase that highlights his philosophy: "Luck is where preparation meets opportunity."

Satryano said that when Pray would meet with the students, typically children starting at about nine years old through high school, he would approach them with firm handshakes and expect that if they want to be treated like adults, they needed to act appropriately. Pray's 12 Steps to Success are discussed, which are mainly a set of principles and habits he found successful throughout his life.

"It's about you and you making a



MARTIN WILBUR PHOTOS

Marikay Satryano, executive director of the Malcolm Pray Achievement Center, stands with a classic MG inside the center's main house.

career for yourself, respecting people, respecting your body," she said. "A lot of these are scouting values from the Boy Scouts."

Pray found his life's calling working in the automotive industry when he was 10 years old. His parents brought him to the 1939 World's Fair in Queens, where he set his eyes on a 1937 Delahaye and immediately fell in love with cars.

However, Pray had challenges to overcome throughout his life, most notably being a weak student. After his parents moved from the city to the Greenwich area at the end of the Depression, he attended several different high schools, then went to the University of Virginia.

Similar to the Boy Scouts, which Pray enjoyed growing up, Satryano said, he discovered the necessary direction when he enlisted in the Air Force, and studied accounting.

But cars was in Pray's blood. When he came home in 1955, he saw a help wanted sign for a salesman on a local dealership, Morlee Motors, in Greenwich. Although his parents weren't enamored with his choice, it would be the first and last job he ever had, Satryano said.

"His parents really had envisioned for him the 'Mad Men' of Madison Avenue," she said. "His father worked in Manhattan. The thought of that made him cringe."

A few years later when the dealership's owner died, Pray approached the widow with a plan to buy the business. In time, his business became the most successful Volkswagen dealership in the United States, Satryano said. After acquiring Audi, Pray became the top dealer in that line as well. Over time, he added Porsche, Saab, Mitsubishi, Nissan and Infiniti and his business grew from a single showroom to a sizeable stretch of West Putnam Avenue in Greenwich.

Another challenge Pray was forced to overcome was the death of his 17-year-



Some of the estimated 40 classic cars on display at the Malcolm Pray Achievement Center in Banksville.



old son in 1986, who died in a car accident with a friend on nearby North Street. In one of the garages there is a large photo of his son as a child.

A short time after retiring, Pray searched for something to do that was meaningful and came up with the idea to put his car collection in one place while also trying to help young people, Satryano said. Although a Connecticut resident for decades, Pray found the property in Banksville, which is only a few miles from where he lived and had worked.

"He conceived this place and spent the last 13 years of his life welcoming students and showing them around," she said.

Satryano, a former social studies teacher who served in the U.S. Army during the Iraq War, stressed that the center isn't a shrine to Pray but rather demonstrates to students how through hard work and strong values, one can achieve a successful life.

Near the end of the tour, visitors are given a card to keep. On that card, they jot down their dream and put it away until a time when they need a shot of inspiration.

"Whenever you need some help, it's here for you to pull out and fall back on," Satryano tells visitors. "I can tell you, (Mr. Pray) wouldn't have done any



A photo of Malcolm Pray on the biographical wall of one of the two garages.

of this if he didn't have a dream."

Visitors, including school groups and various youth and church organizations and adults, are encouraged to visit the Malcolm Pray Achievement Center. Visits are free but by appointment only. It is open Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Saturday visits can also be arranged.

For more information, contact Marikay Satryano at 914-234-2579 or visit [www.prayachievementcenter.org](http://www.prayachievementcenter.org).