

## have played major roles in Gail's life



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Gail VanBlaricom is in love with two Stewarts.

The first is the darling of cooks and home decorators, Martha Stewart. But she also has a soft spot for another Stewart, first name Tony.

For those not familiar with the racing circuit, Tony Stewart is the NASCAR driver who won the Nextel Cup in 2005.

At first, it may seem an odd combination, the diva and the driver. But not so when you learn VanBlaricom's history.

The Belleville resident is a seamstress who recently created and made handbags and tote bags specifically to raise funds for breast cancer and she donated a portion of the sale of each to Dr. Doug MacIntosh at the Belleville hospital oncology clinic. She raised \$500 and that alone makes her a good Quinte neighbour.

Meanwhile, her infatuation with pounding pistons comes from her family. She grew up in a Shannonville home with four brothers and the boys were interested in cars.

So what was a poor girl to do but join in.

"All my brothers are into hot rods," VanBlaricom said. "I guess I was a tomboy."

One of her brothers introduced her to Rob VanBlaricom. He was a Brighton resident who — wait for it — repaired, painted and built hot rods.

Not surprisingly, Gail (maiden name Akey) and Rob "hit it off quite well," she said.

They married and have a 28-year-old daughter, Melanie, and two sons, Chris, from Gail's previous marriage, and Lyle, both 36.

Lyle Pederson and Chris were close friends and Lyle was living with a foster family. He asked Gail if he could move in and she said yes and became his foster

mother. Lyle was 15.

About a year-and-a-half ago, Rob and Gail moved from Brighton to Belleville and opened a hot rod shop here.

Gail, 55, had retired from Nortel in 2003

but soon found herself somewhat bored.

"After a while, you think, 'I've got to do something,'" she said.

That "something" came in the form of an old skill, sewing maternity clothes when

she was expecting her first child, Melanie, 28 years ago.

She sewed on and off while at Nortel and after retirement she started up a business, Gail's Bling and Pretty Things. She works at it between 24 and 30 hours a week.

"I've done bridal parties ... I do a little bit of everything."

But the 18-year-old war horse — a Kenmore sewing machine — started making funny noises a while ago.

That caught Rob's attention.

"That machine there," she said, pointing to a new sewing machine in her sewing room, "is two weeks old. My husband got it for my birthday."

Rob knew he had to go with the Sears brand for the new machine.

"I swear by Kenmore," Gail said.

The tote/handbag idea was not Gail's first foray into helping those with cancer.

"I actually have a very good friend who is battling breast cancer right now," she said.

The woman and three others participated in the recent walk for breast cancer in Ottawa and Gail made them shorts and has made other items, as well.

When she is not sewing, she sometimes catches Martha Stewart or City Line on television.

"She watches "anything that's got to do with home decorating."

And, of course, Rob watches all the car programs, with Gail eyeing the tube with him.

The couple have two cats and they are in opposite ends of the age group. Spanky, a tomcat, is 15, while newly acquired Mercury, a tabby, is only eight months.

"Spanky came from a farm and Mercury came from the humane society."

Gail adopted Mercury to help fill the void left when Freddy, her 15-year-old springer spaniel, died in March.

How do the two cats get along?

"Not well at all," Gail confessed, but agreed the felines are learning more tolerance of each other as time goes by.

What with sewing and cars, Gail has a busy and happy life.

But all else pales beside her grandchildren, who she dotes over and is always willing to babysit.

Allison is 8, Colton, 2, and step-grandchildren Madison is 9 and Mackenzie, 7.

Melanie summed up the feelings of her brothers and herself for Gail.

"Our mom has always taken a huge (role) in our lives," she said. "Mom's the go-to person."

What better legacy for a mother?