

# Search for a hubcap turns into a business

By Darrell Clem  
staff writer

The regulars slowly stopped coming to Louie Marcinlak's bar when the nearby Hamtramck Dodge Main plant closed in 1978.

Times were hard two years later when his working-class business folded. "You couldn't buy a job then," he said.

Then Marcinlak stumbled onto a new line of work while looking for a used hubcap for his brother's 1978 Eldorado. When he was told the silver hubcap would cost \$50, he saw green.

"I thought, 'Hell, there's money in this,'" he said. Soon after, he began searching for hubcaps alongside Detroit area roadways and selling them wherever he could.

Marcinlak, a burly man of 49, chewed on a toothpick and spoke in a loud, gruff voice as he walked among the rows of neatly arranged hubcaps hanging on the walls at Hub Cap City, a building at 2024 Cass Lake Road, Keego Harbor.

He works there for Chuck Spak, 27, who inherited the 18-year-old business when his father died several years ago. They're assisted by main-

tenance worker Jerry Willoughby, 19.

"I tell people I work in semi-precious metals," Marcinlak said. "It's creating a job out of something where there is no job."

BEFORE HE was hired four years ago at Hub Cap City, Marcinlak, who also is a weekend security guard for a Farmington Hills wedding hall, would rise early to begin his freelance search for hubcaps. He usually found 20 to 40 hubcaps a day. Some were worthless, some sold for as much as \$50.

"The Lodge freeway used to be my main supplier," said Marcinlak, whose wife divorced him several years ago and "took a hike" to California, taking their 17-year-old son along. "But you've got to get out there before the county workers start making their rounds."

Marcinlak said county workers are selective in what items they pick up. Many will not pass by a hubcap, but Marcinlak once put a tag on a discarded toilet that remained by the freeway for years.

Chewing on his toothpick, Marcinlak also recalled one time he drove all the way from Michigan to Florida, collecting hubcaps along the

way. "I looked like some old hillbilly by the time I got there."

A Detroit police officer once wrote him a citation for working in a freeway median. In court, however, the judge apologized to Marcinlak and scolded the officer for spending his time on such trivial matters.

BY THE time he was hired at Hub Cap City, however, Marcinlak had grown tired of the freelance work. "I got sick of dealing with people on the road."

Store owner Spak, who also is a property manager, said he will not buy the hubcaps if he suspects they have been stolen. With an estimated 10,000 hubcaps — for most any vehicle ranging from 1940s cars to Edsels to recent models — he can afford to turn away suspicious salesmen.

"Some of the hubcaps ain't worth 10 cents," Marcinlak said. "But you can get \$50 for some of them."



Hubcap salesman Louie Marcinlak shows the first hubcap that he ever collected.

DAN DEAN/Staff photographer



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