

Shoe repair shop owner puts sole into his work

By Darrell Clem
staff writer

As a young child, John Garofalo used to stand on a bustling Detroit sidewalk and stare in awe through the window of the shoe repair shop in his neighborhood.

He'd watch for what seemed like hours as the shop owner, working like the most meticulous of artists, repaired shoe after shoe, day after day.

At age 11, Garofalo finally mustered enough courage to ask for a job. He not only wanted the work, he needed it. One of 13 children, he had to help his mother pay the bills that had become a burden since his father, a plumber, had died three years earlier.

"WE DID WHAT we had to do to survive," Garofalo recalls.

That was 52 years ago. At age 63, Garofalo still repairs shoes, but he now runs Johnny's Shoe Repair Shop at 1368 Union Lake Road. He moved to the community of Union Lake 15 years ago to escape the vandals who repeatedly wrecked his former shop in Detroit.

To step into Garofalo's shop is to step back in time. It's not just the shoe repair equipment that dates back to 1925. It's not his Army scrapbook that he keeps in a back room, or the report cards that he received when he returned to school at age 42 and earned a high school diploma.

"I wanted to graduate before my first daughter (the first of his five children) did," he recalls.

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— John Garofalo

Mostly it's the stories that Garofalo, with a touch of sadness in his voice, tells about a way of life on the wane.

"I think the shoe repairman is going the way of the watch repairman, the tailor and the blacksmith," he said, ripping the weathered sole from a shoe that soon would look like new. "Pretty soon there won't be any of us left."

Nowadays, people tend to buy shoes that are simply tossed out when they're used up. "They all wear tennis shoes," Garofalo said. To make matters worse, it costs much more now to pay rent on a shop and buy materials.

"It's just squeezing the shoe repairman right out," he said. "Sometimes it seems like the shoe repair business is going to end when I quit. But I'm going to keep on repairing shoes as long as I'm physically able."

GAROFALO TALKS PROUDLY of a time when the business bustled. Like the time he worked at a shop, near a Ford plant on Woodward, that promised shoe repairs in nine minutes or less; otherwise they were free. Ford workers would bring in

their worn shoes during their lunch breaks.

"Nobody ever got a free shoe repair," Garofalo said, laughing.

During World War II, he remembers when customers had to have coupons to buy shoes, which were being rationed at the time. "That was the busiest time I can remember," he said. "Everybody had their shoes repaired then."

Sometimes Garofalo wonders if he could have been successful at another job.

"But I had a family to raise, and I always managed to make a living out of repairing shoes," he said. "You never get rich, but you never starve."

Garofalo has spent his entire life at work, never taking vacations. The last big trip he took was 25 years ago, when he and his wife, Carmella, went on a honeymoon to Florida.

"I just never took a vacation," he said. "It isn't that I couldn't afford it. I just didn't take one. I'm still me even when I'm in a different place. And I'm happy right here where I am. So why should I go someplace else?"

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John Garofalo applies a new sole to a shoe in his Union Lake repair shop.

DAN DEAN/staff photographer

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