

Hixson BUSINESS

Buddy's Shoe Repair mends city's soles — and souls

BY CARI GERVIN
COMMUNITY NEWS WRITER

For 23 years now there has been a yellow arrow that says "Shoe Repair" pointing to a small shop on Hixson Pike. Below the arrow, a signboard delivers a different message every week or two — sometimes funny, sometimes spiritual.

Everyone comments to Buddy Scallia about his messages. He said he probably has enough stories to fill a book.

But there is one story he remembers the most. One day his sign saved a woman's life.

Mr. Scallia is young for his age, which he requested not be disclosed. He has been repairing shoes since he was eight, when his grandfather, owner of Dee's Shoe Repair in Highland Park, decided to make little Buddy his heir apparent. (Dee had three daughters, and at the time, women were not to whom you handed the family business.)

And shoes — and their repair — was the family business. Mr. Scallia said that his grandfather and his family came to the United States from Sicily in 1906. Some cousins ended up in Chattanooga, and eventually more followed.

At one time, Mr. Scallia said, there were eight shops in town owned by some relative or another that sold or repaired shoes. One of those, Vanderstoop's, is still in existence in East Brainerd. Mr. Scallia's father sold shoes at Loveman's and Miller's department stores downtown.

"He fitted shoes, he didn't just sell them," Mr. Scallia amended. "He wouldn't sell shoes that wouldn't fit."

So it seemed natural that Mr. Scallia would stay in the business. He said he twice thought about pursuing other careers in his youth — once as an accordion player and once as a typewriter technician, a career he said would have evolved into a computer job.

"But my parents kept drilling into me, 'There's nothing like owning your own business. At least you're your own person,'" Mr. Scallia recalled.

He took their advice to heart. Almost 35 years ago, his grandfather retired and Mr. Scallia took over operations at Dee's, which had been in business since 1917. He finally got around to changing the name to Buddy's Shoe Repair 12 years ago.

"Even though I didn't get into big money, like Ted Turner or Donald Trump, those (careers) may not be the best avenue for success," Mr. Scallia said. "Fame, money — is that what you measure life by?"

For Mr. Scallia, the answer is no. He is a devout Christian (and member of Central Baptist Church across the street) and considers his job and his business a ministry unto itself.

Thus, the sign.

Mr. Scallia said that one day a woman came into his shop and began talking to him. She said that a year earlier, her hus-



Buddy Scallia stands behind the counter of the shoe repair shop he has run for almost 35 years. The business has been in operation since 1917. The flowers on the counter were given to him by a financially struggling customer 23 years ago after he repaired the man's shoes for free. Mr. Scallia said that being able to help people through his work is why he owns his own business.

*Photo by
Cari Gervin*

band had deserted her and her children. She was destitute and unable to get a job because she had never learned how to drive.

She took a gun out, she told Mr. Scallia, and began to compose a suicide note. She said she wanted to end it all.

But fate intervened in the form of a phone call, interrupting her note. Mr. Scallia said the woman told him that she put the note aside and put the gun back in a drawer.

At that same moment, just a mile or two away, Mr. Scallia was changing the message on his sign to something inspiring.

When a friend of the suicidal woman dragged her out of the house on an errand, she saw the words of wisdom that changed her life and made her realize that she could not leave her children motherless as well as fatherless.

"She said, 'I'm standing here today because of the message on that sign. I've gotten a driver's license and a car. I have a job, and now we are doing better than we've ever done in our life,'" Mr. Scallia recalled the woman telling him.

"If I didn't own this business, I couldn't do that, I wouldn't have been able to do that," he added.

So what were those words that saved the woman's life? Mr. Scallia said he has no idea. But he said of anything that he could have done with his life, he doesn't think he could have accomplished any-

thing more gratifying.

Mr. Scallia has a number of other stories about the lives he has changed, sometimes by happenstance and sometimes by intention. But the most lives he has affected are simply his regular customers, who come to him as one of the few remaining shoe repair shops in town.

He said that in the 1930s, there were 65 places to get shoes repaired in town. Now there are just five.

"That's the day we live in; it's a throw-away culture," Mr. Scallia said.

Still, his business is booming and keeps

him very busy — as well as his wife Barbara and daughter Tonja, who also work in the shop.

Will she be the first woman to take over the family business?

"The potential is there," Mr. Scallia said. "If she wants to do it."

But don't look for Buddy's name to change anytime soon.

"I've tried backing off from work, and I don't like that. I'd rather be busy," Mr. Scallia said with a laugh.

E-mail Cari Gervin at cgervin@tfccommunitynews.com

Don't Miss Out On The Ride!

Holiday Special 15% off
any part or accessory in stock



Everything Bicycling!

Top-quality bicycles to fit any age, size or budget

- Parts and accessories
- Full-service repair shop
- Touring and racing equipment
- Car racks and carriers



Financing Available
Open Mon-Sat 10am-6pm • 265-7176 • www.rivercitybikes.com

112 Tremont St. on the Northshore