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Shoe guy shines as bright as his shoes

by Suzanne Hurt, published on August 5, 2009 at 8:29PM

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He arrives at 7:30 every weekday morning in a tie and crisp white shirt, dress trousers and that big smile. The shine on his shoes has been decades in the making.

But he doesn't disappear into the upper reaches of some government building or law office. His workplace is a shaded black bench at the corner of 14th and I streets.

Gee -- just Gee -- is a shoeshine man. Yet he's no ordinary shoeshine man -- if there even is such a thing.

He's got far too much passion about his work and the importance of a well-shined shoe to be considered ordinary. And then there's that whole flaming shoeshine thing.

Gee sets up shop where he can find a steady stream of people who take their shoes as seriously as he does -- which is what led him to relocate his business from Roseville to downtown Sacramento six weeks ago.

"I don't want to have to convince somebody to take care of their shoes," he says. "I want people who dress sharp and wear nice shoes and get their shoes taken care of.

"If a guy's wearing a \$200- to \$400-pair of shoes -- I can't even afford shoes like that -- and he doesn't take care of them, to me, it's an insult to the shoe. And to me -- because I'm a shoeshine guy," he says.

Gee got a social science degree at San Joaquin Valley College some years back. Later, he ran a limo service in Sacramento for 11 years. He's managed people and worked as a car salesman and sales manager.

He also was a talented boxer who took a shot at going pro. His wife didn't like the idea; she didn't want him or his face getting beaten up. Then he got his ribs broken in a match and found he agreed with her.

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Right now, he's a shoeshine man and a cobbler. He puts everything he's got into doing the best job he can -- at \$7 per pair of shoes.

He learned the trade as a kid working alongside uncles. One ran a shoe repair shop out of his north Sacramento garage. The other ran a shoeshine stand in the Capitol for more than 15 years.

"It's just an old-school profession," he beams. Gee himself is not that old. But he remembers a time when there used to be a shoeshine man every four to five blocks downtown.

While veteran shoe repair and shoeshine men retire or close up shop, younger sidewalk entrepreneurs like Gee get their business licenses and roll out their shoeshine kits.

One morning, federal agency staffer and lobbyist Tim Boyd sits down for a shine. Wearing a black smock and knee pads, Gee kneels on the sidewalk in front of Boyd, deftly rolls up the man's pant legs and gets to work. His gloved hands spray and brush and daub and buff with the speed and precision of a machine car wash.

Gee times his work for consistency and quality, and to help busy clients get on their way quickly. He's developed a shining process that he said has a few extra steps more than most shoeshiners. He doesn't give those trade secrets away. Boyd says he's quickly become one of Gee's regular customers.

"This brother is brilliant," says Boyd, who grew up with Mayor Kevin Johnson. "I don't care how good the outfit is. If your shoes ain't happenin', it ain't happenin'."

Some day, Gee may cut loose for Hollywood. He'd like to see if he can get work as a comedian. He's already got some entertainment lined up: the flaming shoeshine he gives to customers he knows. He finishes Boyd's shoeshine by daubing wax polish on the top of each shoe, setting the polish on fire and then buffing it into the shoe leather.

Gee ran his shoe repair and shine service in Roseville for five years. He was stationed in the automall and did scheduled outcalls to banks. Business was lucrative at first; he took care of shoes for car salesmen, bankers and mortgage brokers.

"When business was thriving, people were more free with the money. The tips were generous and it was abundant. They just wanted to pamper themselves," Gee says.

Mortgage brokers noticed Gee's work ethic and his charismatic presence. They told him he'd make a good broker. But the way they got business from customers -- getting them on the hook and then yanking it -- didn't sound fair, Gee says.

"Some people had no couth or integrity," he says. "You've got to have ethics."

He saw the recession before a lot of others as their business began to suffer -- and so did his.

"When money started decreasing, people started conserving and cutting back," he says. "It was -- 'Hey, this is 10 bucks I can hang onto and put into the gas tank.' "

Gee rolled into Sacramento and tried a couple other locations before setting up outside the California Department of Justice building. From 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. weekdays, he shines even brighter than the shoes while making friends and marketing his services to people passing by.

Gee's pride in helping other people look good becomes quickly obvious. The

secret to a long shoe life is to have them regularly maintained, rather than waiting until shoes are too beat up for even him to work with, he says.

"If you consider yourself a sharp-dressed man or you call yourself a gentleman -- look the part," he adds. "I can't stand to see a guy who's dressed in nice black pants and a good shirt, but his shoes are like crap."

Gee recalled learning the importance of taking care of his shoes not only from his uncles, but boys in the 'hood, after he bought his first pair of Stacy Adams shoes -- considered by many to be some of the sharpest, if not the most comfortable, men's shoes out there. He was just entering his teen years then.

"I grew up in the 'hood, the barrio. You don't take care of your shoes, and the homeboys would talk about you," he says. "You come around with a pair of Stacy Adamses and they don't look good -- that wasn't right."

After surviving some blistering days outside, Gee has been looking for an inside location. He plans to move inside a building at 816 H St. soon. But if he had another trade that could earn him more money, he'd do that instead.

"This isn't necessarily what I want to do. It's about survival right now," he says. "They tell me I'm damn good at it, so I'm going to do it."

Suzanne Hurt is a staff reporter for The Sacramento Press.

Conversation

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