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John Carlisle: The accidental locksmith finds the American Dream in Detroit

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'I had nothing else to do so I came here one day and got the job. I liked the work and then I stick with it,' Dave Singh, owner of Bill's Fix-It Shop, said. Singh worked part-time at the shop for almost 40 years and now owns the business. 'I never thought I'd be a locksmith.' / Ryan Garza / Detroit Free Press

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By John Carlisle
Detroit Free Press
Columnist

After all these years, Dave's still in love.

He's the owner of Bill's Fix-It Shop, an 82-year-old locksmith that is one of the last old-fashioned, mom-and-pop businesses left along a strip of Fort Street at the edge of Detroit's Delray neighborhood.

The 70-year-old started working at the shop nearly four decades ago when he was a young immigrant from India named Sukhdev Singh looking for part-time work. He wound up buying the business and sending two kids to college with what he earned. Along the way, customers Americanized him with the name Dave.

The shop is surrounded by blight now. Vandals keep spray-painting

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their tags all over his walls, as if his business is already dead and abandoned. What money he makes comes a few dollars at a time from a few regulars.

He's the caretaker of a slow business on a dying street in a dead part of the city. And to him, this is still the American Dream.

"I love this country," he said, and will say to anyone who walks in the door. "You work hard and you can have everything."

Patriotic to the core

Singh is so patriotic because of what he left behind to get here. He was the son of a sugarcane farmer in Punjab, and he became convinced early on that it would be impossible for him to have a decent life if he stayed in India, no matter how hard he worked.

He never forgot the man who, for decades, would walk past the Singh family farm to his job at the sugar mill down the road. That could soon be him, he thought.

"Every day, for 20 years, I watched him," he said. "He couldn't even afford to buy a bicycle. So how successful would I have been getting a little job like that?"

He earned a degree in science in India, worked in a laboratory as a chemist, came to Detroit, enrolled in the now-defunct Detroit College of Applied Science in Allen Park and earned a degree in engineering.

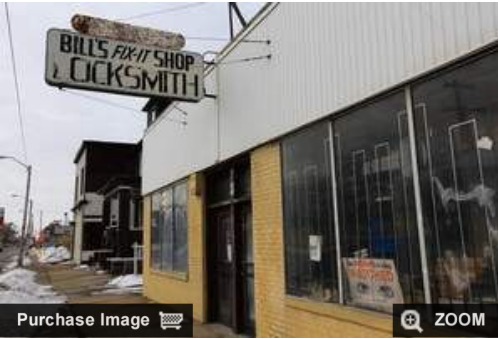
Despite that background and schooling, he spent a blue-collar life making keys in a gritty part of the city.

It became a career by chance. One day, during a summer break from school, he saw an ad for a locksmith right by his house in Delray.

It turned out to be a help-wanted ad for Bill's Fix-It Shop, which opened in 1932 as an all-purpose repair shop where people brought

their bikes, their guns, metal scales — anything with parts that needed fixing. Later it became just a bicycle store, and eventually a key shop and locksmith. Singh spent two summers there making keys and fixing locks.

After his student visa expired, he had to leave the country. He



Bill's Fix It Shop in Detroit. / Ryan Garza / Detroit Free Press



Dave Singh owner of Bill's Fix-It Shop makes a copy of a key for a customer at his shop in Detroit on January 20, 2014. / Ryan Garza / Detroit Free Press

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moved to Canada, as close as he could be to Detroit, and tried to figure out how to return to his old home for good.

“I used to sit on the river on the other side and think, ‘Oh, God, it would be great if I could go back to America,’ ” he said.

A long memory

As Singh’s van rolled slowly down the streets of southwest Detroit on a cold January day, he recalled every job he’s done, every customer he’s met.

“I have worked in this building,” he said, pointing to a grocery store. “I came to this house three times. I opened a car in this parking lot for a lady. I changed the lock on this building. There was a hotel here, and I came five times here. I remember everything.”

Singh parked his van back in the dirt lot next to his shop, got out and unlocked the front doors. It’s hard to tell the business is still open from the outside, apart from the sight of the overhead lights shining dimly through the cloudy glass of the windows.

Inside, thousands of keys hang from little hooks on the walls. Hundreds of boxes of locks and bolts fill the winding storerooms. An old safe, some well-worn key cutters and bench vises smoothed by years of wear sit where they sat back when he spent those summers working here as a student.

At the end of one of those summers, as he was about to leave for Canada, the owners told him that he was always welcome to work at the key shop if he ever became a citizen.

He visited the American embassy in Toronto, and the consul there asked how he’d support himself if he were allowed to immigrate to the states. Singh proudly bragged how he had saved thousands of dollars by working odd jobs between semesters, like his summer work at the locksmith.

The man was stunned, not just because of the young man’s ambition, but particularly because Singh wasn’t supposed to be working at all while here on a student visa — certainly not enough to save that much cash.

“But if you can make money like that when you were a student,” the man told him quietly, “you can make millions. We need a guy like you.”

Singh beamed at the memory of the compliment. “That was the highest point in my life,” he said.

He wasn’t kidding. As he sat in his shop later that week, forgetting that he’d told the story before, he said, “Let me tell you the best thing that happened in my life.”

It was that story again.

'Bless you, buddy'

"Hello, brother!" Singh sang to the customer who walked in the door.

Greg Zontini came from the Detroit Produce Terminal just down the street, where the area's fruits and vegetables first arrive in town. He needed seven keys at \$2 each. It wasn't much of an order. Still, Singh cheerfully told him, "God bless you, buddy," for the business.

Zontini has come here for 30 years, since the span of the road between the locksmith and the terminal was still filled with mom-and-pop places like this, each offering a single product or performing some specific function.

Then a million people moved out of the city, a lot of these little businesses that relied on them closed, and big box stores came along and rendered the remaining ones extinct by offering their products and services cheaply under a one-stop roof.

Like getting a key made.

"But you gotta go to a locksmith like Dave," Zontini insisted. "They try to make keys at those places, and the keys aren't right. We've gotten them there, and they didn't work. He knows how to do them right. He's a good man."

Singh doesn't need the money anymore and could retire any day, but he said regulars like Zontini bring him back to work every day but one during the week. They're loyal to him, so he's loyal to them.

"Even if I have just a few customers, they are like family to me," he said. "That's why I keep it going. It's good for me and good for everybody else."

A loud truck roared by outside. Dirty snow splashed at the shop's vandalized walls. Nobody was walking by on the street, few people were stopping in. And Singh still loved it all.

"Beautiful life," he said. "When I work all day hard then I go home, I am the most happiest man sleeping in my room watching my television. This is my country and it is my home and I love it and everything is fine."

John Carlisle is a columnist who writes about interesting people and places throughout the state. Read more columns at freep.com/carlisle. Contact him: jcarlisle@freepress.com or 313-222-6582



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