

Old-World Quality

Learning the cobbler trade helps to keep alive ancient tradition of shoe repair

By Jeanie Senior

Since June, John Garner has operated the only shoe repair business in the Columbia Gorge.

Clients of St. Crispin's Boot and Shoe Repair tell him they are thrilled they no longer have to take their shoes to Portland or Yakima to be repaired, John says.

"Business has been pretty steady," he says. "People say, 'Gosh, I'm so glad you are here.'"

John works on shoes and boots in a shop building near the Garners' home outside Goldendale. Clients drop off their shoes at two locations: The General Store on Main Street in Goldendale, and Ernie's Locks and Keys in The Dalles.

Customers pay the repair bill when they pick up the shoes.

John's wife, Lucia, picks up and delivers shoes in The Dalles on Tuesdays.

"It's a pretty quick turnaround," says John, who also gets a steady stream of shoes from Goldendale. "I really try to keep on top of it."

He named his business after one of the patron saints of cobblers, leather workers and shoemakers. St. Crispin and his twin, St. Crispian, were third century Roman nobles who evangelized during the day and did cobbler work at night.

John also has a day job. He is a mental health therapist and clinical supervisor at the private nonprofit Comprehensive Mental Health office in Goldendale.

"I do enjoy it," John says of his new business. "I work evenings and weekends. During the day when I do mental health counseling, I'm pretty much sitting all day. It's nice when I can get into the shop



John Garner repairs a boot in his cobbler shop.

and work with my hands. I've always been a person who likes to work with machines."

Lucia calls her husband "a white collar worker and a blue collar worker. It's really great."

She notes he also worked as a pressman in a print shop while he was in college and after he graduated.

"One of his friends who taught him how to do press work saw his shop recently and said, 'You can take the man out of the trade, you can't take the trade out of the man,'" Lucia says. "I thought that was a perfect quote."

John also is completing his doctoral dissertation. He started work on his doctorate program in 2001. The Garner family, including John and Lucia's son, Ian, and daughters, Gina and Sophia,

lived in a village near Thessaloniki, Greece, where he studied at Aristotle University. They spent two years there, moving to Goldendale in 2005.

John says his venture into shoe repair was "fairly unexpected."

"Actually, I had kind of a practical reason," he says. "I was looking for ways to make more money."

Lucia had mentioned to him that a Goldendale couple had a shoe repair business for sale. When John called, he found they had a buyer. A few months later, he learned the sale had fallen through, but another sale, also to an out-of-town buyer, was pending. When that sale didn't happen, John stepped to the front of the buyer's line.

What he acquired was a fully-stocked shoe repair shop, complete with 70-year-old machinery and supplies that ranged from soles to shoestrings and shoe polish to stacks of heels. The seller came over one evening and showed him how the machines worked, and later taught him to maintain them.

John, who had been reading up on shoe repair and watching videos on the subject, visited shoe repair shops in Portland hoping to find a place where he could watch a cobbler at work.

Most said they were too busy. Then he found a cobbler in Hillsdale, who by happy coincidence had the same machines. After John spent two days watching her and her helper do repairs, she offered to train John.

The training involved eight- to 10-hour days, "where I worked and worked and worked and learned a whole lot about how to do all kinds of different shoes," John says.



John sits on a cobbler's bench surrounded by machines he acquired when he purchased a cobbler business. He named his business St. Crispin's Boot and Shoe Repair, after the patron saint of cobblers.

His teacher had been a cobbler for 30 years.

"She told me you've got to move fast," he says. "But first, you have to get good at it, do good quality work. Then the speed comes."

John practiced on a variety of shoes and boots that he bought at thrift shops.

"She talked me through all kinds of different shoes," he says. "My confidence was way up after that."

Open for business, John got a pair of cowboy boots from The Dalles whose owner wanted them completely restored, from the bottom up. He took them to

his mentor, who said, "This is a most difficult shoe repair, and you're not ready."

After that remark, however, she walked him through the process while he took profuse notes. The boots turned out well, and the owner was pleased.

Now, he says, "I have gotten a lot of different kinds of work. I'm getting more and more acquainted with the kind of shoes that people like."

The whole Garner family is helping with St. Crispin's. Sophia is learning to shine shoes and wants to learn shoe repair. Gina handles the bookkeeping.

Lucia, an artist, designs business cards.

John continues to study shoe repair and shoemaking. He is interested in making or modifying shoes to help people with foot problems.

"I know I'm getting more and more seasoned in the craft," John says. "I guarantee my work. I tell people, if you're not happy or something comes loose, let me know. I haven't heard any complaints so far, and I've only had one job come back because I missed a stitch.

"I do what the cobbler taught me. I want to not only fix the shoe, but send it back looking as new as possible." ■