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'Boss of Gloss' Jim Goff keeps downtown strutting, one shoeshine at a time

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At the intersection of Southeast First Street and Second Avenue in the heart of Gainesville, businesspeople shuffle to and from their offices, friends pick out a spot for lunch, and bicyclists leisurely pedal by.

And all the while, someone is watching, carefully examining something no one leaves home without — their shoes.

"When you've been in the business, you can't help it," fast-talking Jim Goff said of his mindful eye, sneaking peaks at the pairs of Oxfords, loafers and sneakers as they pass.

Goff has had his downtown shoeshine stand for about four years, welcoming an untold number women and men, lawyers and developers, and visitors here for Gator game days.

"It's convenient. He does a great job. I can sit there and have them done or drop them off, and it's a good service for downtown," said Ken McGurn, a Gainesville developer who couldn't estimate how long he has been a customer of Goff's.

But Goff has much deeper roots in the shoe business, starting in the late 1950s. It was then he snagged a job as a teenager doing odds and ends at a shoe shop on Fifth Avenue.

The owner "asked me if I was interested in shining shoes, and I said, 'Yeah.' So he taught me the trade," the 74-year-old lifelong resident of Gainesville remembered.

In 1959, a customer gave Goff a nickname he holds onto today — the Boss of Gloss. "Now you're going to have to live up to it," the customer said.

Goff, though, hasn't done shoes ever since. There have been gaps when he has worked for the city and for a smoke shop, but he said he somehow always returns to footwear.

"Some kind of way, in and out, I always get into this," he said with a laugh.

His downtown stand cost about \$600 or \$700 and was funded by Gainesville developer Billy Scheel, who had it built before deciding on someone to run it.



Doug Finger/The Gainesville Sun

James Goff operates a shoeshine stand at Southeast First Street and Second Avenue in downtown Gainesville.

Goff noticed it one day and started asking around, and Scheel ended up giving it to him at no charge. Scheel described the stand as “something different for our businesspeople” that’s accented by Goff’s people-person personality.

“It’s just good for downtown,” Scheel said.

The tradition of having a good shoeshine is a dying one, Goff said, noting that his clientele are primarily from older generations.

“With the time change and the new generation and the shoe changes, a lot of people don’t get shines,” he said, adding that casual Friday wear hasn’t helped, either.

But he and another Gainesville shoeshiner, 91-year-old Amos Lewis Jr. of Amos’ Shoe Shine Parlor on Northwest Sixth Street, are still going strong.

“We don’t even think about it,” Goff joked when asked about if there’s a competition. “At 91, he’s ill — not a lot, (but) it comes with age. Sometimes, he might take two months or three months off.

“And when he does that, a lot of his customers or church members or whatever, they’ll come by (and say), ‘Well, I’m going to let you take care of me until Mr. Lewis gets back to work.’ ”

Goff is downtown near Vellos Brickstreet Grill every weekday from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. His price starts at \$5 for a basic shine on brown, black or burgundy shoes, and goes up for white shoes, boots and other items that need more work.

He also does shoe dying.

“You’ve got to really know what you’re doing to dye a shoe,” he said, “because if you mess up, you’ve got to pay it, you’ve got to buy that shoe. And there’s some shoes you don’t want to buy because of the price.”

He has a shop area in the back of Vellos to work on drop-off items and those he wants to avoid sweating on because they can’t get wet.

Many times, though, especially on Fridays, business will be slow. That’s when Goff said he takes time to enjoy being outdoors and downtown.

Even people who don’t stop for a shine wave as they stroll by, looking like they’ve been friends for decades. “I know every — man, I know everybody down here,” Goff said.

The people and “because I love to do it” are keeping retirement out of Goff’s mind — plus the fact that “Mr. Amos is 91 and he’s still rolling.”

“Shoes are a work of art,” he said, “so what you put into it is what you’re going to get out of it.”

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