



Betty Collins of Lexington is the 10,000th customer and receives a \$100 American Express Gift Check!



Betty Collins signs the book at the Fixit-Shop. Her fan is item 10,000!

By Laurie Atwater

It starts out slow at the Fixit Shop. It's 9 a.m. and the guys are at their benches working on sundry items, turned over temporarily by their owners in hopes that they will be returned to operational status. Toasters, microwaves, lamps and fans are upturned and opened up revealing their inner workings which are most often, not working.

Who are these guys in a basement room of the Senior Center puzzling over wires and fittings and switches?

Who is the man peering knowingly into the cavernous belly of a microwave

oven? Would it surprise you to know that he was an actual microwave engineer?

"I worked on over 70 different microwave tubes at Raytheon," says Bob Edwards, Lexington resident and Fixit-Shop volunteer. He retired from Raytheon in 1990 and will be eighty-five at his next birthday. He's been at the Fixit-Shop shop for fifteen years now and is an enthusiastic booster.

"We serve mostly the elderly but we don't restrict it," says Edwards. "The idea was to help the elderly so they don't have to throw things away and buy new ones." Many of their customers come in with items

of great sentimental value. "Maybe it was given to them by a parent or grandparent," Bob says. The things that are so dear to the customers receive special consideration. "Some things just can't be replaced," he says. Like most of the other men at the shop, he volunteers because he enjoys interacting with the customers. "It makes you feel good to know you are helping," he says.

Many of the customers are widows and they rely on the Fixit guys to help with their repairs. It works out perfectly since many of the men want to get out of the house and tinker.

Fixit-Shop Celebrates 10,000th Customer!



Arthur Pennell, the unofficial shop manager, confers with a customer.

Jam Packed

The small room in the basement of the senior center is jam packed with items waiting to be repaired or waiting to be picked-up. Business is brisk. "We never turn anyone away," says Arthur Pennell. Arthur is the unofficial shop manager. He greets customers, takes their items in, gives them a number and makes sure they sign the book. It's a role he knows well. Arthur ran his own TV and Radio Repair shop in Lexington—Upland Service—for many years. Before that he worked as an electronics engineer for EG&G and he specialized in communications. Arthur is 78 and has been at the shop since 1995. Pennell feels the service is very important to the elderly community because many seniors don't have the means to replace household items that go on the blink.

But fixing things has become progressively more difficult. "More and more things are put together these days so you can't take them apart," Pennell says. "You've got to figure out how it's supposed to work before you can figure out how to fix it," he adds. That's hard to do when it won't even come apart.

The Fixit-Shop cannot repair most TVs or computers or computer printers. Any item with advanced electronics is not a candidate for the Fixit Shop. "We can't get diagrams for most of the sophisticated electronic devices these days," Edwards says. The trend nowadays is to create

items with built-in obsolescence so sometimes parts aren't even available for older models by the time they break down!

Still, many items are perfect candidates for repair and the guys find it rewarding to return a working lamp to an avid reader or a fan that can cool someone off in the middle of August! Many of the repairs are simple says Edwards. For example, microwave ovens won't work if the latch is broken and that's a very simple repair. Most lamps can be rewired, chairs can be re-glued, many fans can be rehabilitated and clocks can be reworked. Some vacuum cleaners just need to be cleaned to get them going.

The Fixit volunteers also enjoy the camaraderie they have developed over the years. "We complement each other," Edwards says. "We each have different strengths."

An Overqualified Staff

This particular day could mark an important milestone in Fixit-Shop history. If everything goes as anticipated, customer number 10,000 will walk through the door. The volunteers at the Fixit-Shop decided to mark this important event by awarding the lucky 10,000th customer with \$100 American Express Gift Check!

The shop was founded in 1986 by Elmer Bull. Bull, who has since passed



Left to right: Fixit-Shop volunteers and retired engineers Bob Edwards, Burt Smith, Arthur Pennell, John Furnstahl and Dan Brzezinski.



John Furnstahl working on a broken blow dryer.

big mistake taking industrial arts out of the high school curriculum. “Shop was very helpful for most students,” he says. A couple of his friends still teach at MIT and bemoan the lack of practical knowledge they see in today’s students. “They don’t know

away. Elmer was a local engineer and inventor. He started the shop with a donation of \$850 from Raytheon and it’s been going strong ever since. Over the years they have brought in tools from home, received donations of tools, converted the industrial sink into a home for woodworking tools and generally attempted to put every square inch of space to good use.

Waiting for magic number 10,000 gives me a change to get to know the guys on the bench a little better. Dan Brzezinski, who is patiently working on an old radio, was a quality assurance engineer in Raytheon’s Missile System Division. He likes working at the shop because he is “always learning something new.” While we chat, a young woman comes in with a phone charger that isn’t working and hands it to Dan.

Dan values working with his hands and the problem-solving aspects of approaching each new job. “Everything is different. No two toasters are alike,” he says. Dan feels that schools have made a

how to solve a practical problem,” Dan says shaking his head.

Burt Smith is working on something in an adjoining room. Burt is also a former Raytheon microwave engineer who worked on the traveling wave tube technology used in the highly successful Patriot Missiles deployed in the first Gulf War. Today Burt is miles away from missile defense—he is engaging with his more creative side having been charged with painting the figure of a cat for one of the customers. “She wants it white with green eyes,” he says, and he has complied. The first coat of white paint looks great on tabby!

Burt retired in 1992. He’ll be 85 in September and is going strong! He started at the Fixit-Shop in 2000 and has enjoyed helping people out with their repairs. “It makes you think about what is important,” he says. He enjoys the change of pace and the “challenges and nice people.” He is particularly pleased when he can help someone to save a few dollars.

John Furnstahl is a real-life rocket scientist. He worked for RCA Aerospace in Burlington on projects related to the Apollo space program. Right now he has a hair dryer in his hand that he is testing. John is 87 years old and he is both a mechanical and an electrical engineer. He obviously loves what he is doing and shows me a great 3-D card from one of his children featuring a tool box just bursting with tools. Obviously he is known for his fixit skills at home as well as at the senior center!

Satisfied Customers

From his perch at the end of the bench he recalls one particular repair that yielded a whopping \$300 contribution to the Council on Aging. “It was just an ordinary wheelchair,” he says, “but one of the one of the crossbars was broken and needed a weld.” That jolts Bob’s memory and he recalls a ride-around Rascal that would jump out of gear every time its owner hit a bump. “The company wanted a fortune to fix it,” he recalls. “We put a heavy spring on it so it would stay in gear and he saved a bundle.” That repair also yielded a generous donation which makes the Fixit volunteers feel really great. All of the contributions go directly to the Council on Aging.

While we sit and chat a clock chimes loudly and my neck head turns reflexively to check the time. When I turn I notice that there are dozens of clocks scattered about



A broken clock awaits Charlie's return.



Bob Edwards contemplates a microwave oven.



The Fixit-Shop sees dozens of toasters each year.

the room. Bob informs me that clocks are Charlie Schock’s department. Charlie was a mechanical engineer at Arthur D. Little and he likes mechanisms. In fact, Charlie is in the hospital for a bit of mechanical work himself—a knee replacement—so he missed the excitement of waiting for number 10,000. We hope that Charlie’s new mechanism works as well as his clocks and assure him that there are many clocks awaiting his deft touch.

I ask the guys whether they participate in any of the other programs at the senior center. Bob used to sing with the Young at Heart Singers, but no longer has the voice for it he says, Arthur is quite serious about his table tennis and Dan is active in the Computer Club. They value the program-

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ming at the center and look forward to a time when it can be expanded. Because of the arrangement with the condo community at Muzzey, they explain, the center has to close down at 4 p.m.

Sitting in the small room is kind of a kick. It reminds me of the basement of my dad's shop with "perfectly good," but malfunctioning appliances, chairs, tables and other items awaiting some TLC. Of course, items that disappeared into our basement seemed to take forever to reappear in an operational capacity much to my mother's dismay.

But this isn't the case at the Fixit-Shop. Pennell is pretty clear with customers about when they may be able to get to their items back. "Most things will be finished in a week's time depending on the backlog of items," he explains. Sometimes it requires more patience, and a complicated job could take a month. Most folks are happy to wait because they can't beat the price!

While I am waiting for the 10,000th customer to appear, Masha Traber flies through the door with what looks like a very small bull horn. In fact it is her miniature PA system that's in need of repair. Masha is the head guide on the Liberty Ride and uses the gizmo to inform our tourists of the many historical treasures here in Lexington. The broken bullhorn becomes *Item 9994*. We wait.

Another fan shoes up lugging a small tea table. She looks familiar and it turns out that it is Ellen Epstein, former owner of Overall Music (a great music store that used to be in Lexington Center). Ellen's table has a wobbly top. She is a big fan of the Fixit Shop. "I've brought in countless lamps and fans," she says. Most of the repairs are small but she can't do them herself. She reminds me that she often picks up a couple of books on the way out at the Library table.

It strikes me that with all the hustle and bustle in the place it's amazing that anyone gets anything done, but they have the system down. Arthur is the public face, keeping everyone organized and moving things along to minimize the distractions for the guys on the job. I can't help but notice however, that there is a steady stream of very attractive ladies coming through the door of the shop which may provide a little extra incentive to show up and work hard.

Barbara Kent has a chair that needs a seat (the caning did not last as long as the frame) and Kent would like a solution. One of the guys locates a piece of wood that do the job after it's been cut into shape and customer 9996 is on her way with the promise of a usable seat in a few weeks.

Barbara gushes about the "great service" before she leaves.

Nellie Bogosian has a vacuum that may require a bit more engineering expertise. They'll "take a look at it" Arthur says. No promises.

If the repair requires expensive parts they notify the owner before proceeding. That's one thing that they can't cover, but most people are happy to be hear that their item can be fixed so they happily cover the expense of parts.

We get talking about parts and Arthur mentions this customer who kept bringing in antique chandeliers to be rewired. After awhile the guys wondered just how many chandeliers one home could have so they went back in their records and found that they had repaired twenty chandeliers for this one customer! No doubt this collector was reconditioning old fixtures from yard sales or estate sales and having them rewired. The Fixit-Shop was happy to help.

My mother-in-law's neighbor Joan Heffernan suddenly appears at the door with her usual cheerfulness and by this time I'm not surprised to see a familiar face. It seems that I may be the last to know about this great resource. Joan has a towel rack that needs something or other done to it. After chatting it up a bit she notes seriously that she is a "very satisfied customer" and thinks the guys are "the greatest." I explain that we are waiting for the ten thousandth customer.

This is more socializing than I've had in awhile and realize just how great this is for a bunch of retired guys to run an operation that helps dozens of people, provides constant challenges and involves lots of social interaction. Still we wait for Number 10,000, but we don't have to wait long.

Betty Collins—The 10,000th Customer

With a heavy floor fan in hand, Betty Collins of Oak Street in Lexington crosses the threshold of the Fixit Shop and is greeted by Bob Edwards who is poised to present the check! It takes her a minute to comprehend, but she is thrilled by the honor and the money and says she'll definitely "find a way to spend it!"

Betty it turns out is a regular customer. He also has a small bird figurine with her that has become separated at the tail feathers! "No problem," says Arthur.

It's just about 11:00 a.m. and I've been immersed in the Fixit-Shop culture for about two hours. Boy, time flies in such a busy place. Congratulations to Betty and to the great volunteers of the Fixit-Shop who provide a great service to the community!

The Fixit-Shop is located in the bottom floor of the Senior Center in th Muzzey Condos on Mass. Ave.