

# SHOP OWNER HAS TIME IN HIS HANDS

New business  
helps man get life  
ticking again

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By Lisa Reisman  
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In his recent address to Congress about the American people's strength of spirit, President Barack Obama could have been talking about Louis Fafard. The owner of the new Louie's Watch Repair in Guilford, Fafard, with dogged initiative and a serendipitous meeting, rose above adversity and got his life ticking again.

Eight years ago, the amiable, 36-year-old supported his family by installing chain-link and wooden fences. Then he hurt his back. His doctor told him he could no longer do any kind of manual labor – he might end up in a wheelchair. "That was the bottom," he said.

As his wife drove him from the doctor's office to his Putnam home, Fafard stared blankly out his window. Out of nowhere, another challenge he'd faced, his grandfather's pocketwatch, came into his mind. "I took it apart and couldn't get it back together," he said. "It just intrigued me, all the moving parts, all the intricate mechanisms, and I guess I never forgot about it."

Recalling his sense of satisfaction in finally figuring it out, Fafard looked around to see how he could educate himself in watch repair. Soon he



Eight years ago, the amiable, 36-year-old Fafard supported his family by installing chain-link and wood fences. A back injury became the motivation to enter a new field – and Louie's Watch Repair of Guilford was born.

Photos by Mike Michaels



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enrolled at the American Watchmakers Institute and learned everything he could about horology, the art and science of time-keeping devices. Once he got his certificate, he was looking for some watch parts. It was then someone told him about Joe Barrows.

Barrows is a legend, a nationally renowned master watchmaker. As Fafard puts it, "if there was a black belt for watch repair, Joe would be a fifth-degree black belt." Barrows, now 79, had a shop just off Route One in Guilford since 1977 and had been in watch repair since he was a teenager. Unknown to Fafard, as he made the 90-minute trip from Putnam to meet him, Barrows was hoping to retire within a few years.

"From the time I first walked through the door, I felt at home," says Fafard; as the clocks that crowd the far wall chime and tick and strike in chorus in the mild light of the shop. "Right away I could imagine myself working here." Sensing Fafard's keen interest, the master craftsman asked the younger man to be his apprentice, promising to teach him everything he knew. If Fafard took to the work, Barrows told him, he'd be willing to consider selling him the business.

Becoming adept at the craft of watchmaking is a painstaking process that requires hand-eye dexterity,

mechanical aptitude, steady hands, and lots of patience.

It's for that reason that the term watchmaker has become synonymous with watch repairer: the same level of craftsmanship to manufacture a watch is needed to repair one. As with any craft, once you've gained a foundation, you hone your skills by trial and error. And it takes years.

Considering that Barrows had been repairing watches for close to six decades, "I couldn't have asked for a better teacher," Fafard says. "He knows every trick in the book, what to look for, how it's pretty much a process of elimination." If a problem arose, he had only to call out to the tall, distinguished-looking Barrows in the pocket-sized shop, and Barrows would talk him through the process.

The value of Barrows' longevity in the watch repair business does not end with the skills he's passed on to Fafard. Over the years, he's built up a considerable following, and not only because of his rarefied mastery of the craft. There's a sort of old-fashioned cordiality to Joe Barrows, as well as a small-town kindness, that seem to have rubbed off on Fafard as well. "Sometimes, if they're

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replacing a strap or a link, I've seen one or the other say 'don't worry about it,'" says Ken Herbert, owner of the Guilford Optical Shoppe next door.

Another benefit is the wood cabinet with dozens of narrow drawers that stands beside Fafard's work table. It belonged to Barrows'

father who was also a watchmaker and is filled with pocket-watch parts that are no longer available. Not to mention the long list of suppliers that Barrows has amassed. "Any part we either have, or we can get," Fafard says.

This is part of what makes Louie's Watch Repair unique: it's the only shop on the shoreline that does all its work in-house—and it's not just batteries or straps they'll install or replace while the customer waits. Fafard and Barrows also do more complicated repairs on the premises. That means

there's no need to give up care and custody of a watch by sending it to a factory service center, as watch manufacturers commonly recommend, and to wait weeks or even months before it's returned. "We do it at a fraction of the cost and usually within a week," says Fafard.

Even so, when asked why, in view of the woeful state of the economy, anyone with a malfunctioning watch would consider investing in getting it fixed, Fafard allows for the problem that has bedeviled watchmakers since the late 1950s: the advent of quartz-movement watches and clocks that are cheaper to replace than repair and that, as

a result, heralded the decline of the profession. The roughly 50,000 veterans trained by the government in watchmaking after World War II steered their kids away from the dying trade. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are currently about 5,000 repairers in the U.S.; their average age is 68.

At the same time, "people have a special connection to their watches that makes it hard to give them up," Fafard says, as he labors over the delicate innards of a mechanical timepiece amid the warmth and friendly clutter of his shop. And that, he believes, will keep the trade ticking. "Look at it," he says, beholding the watch with a certain measure of awe. "Someone's great-grandfather was wearing this on his wrist and using it to tell the time in 1910. And when I'm done, his great-grandson will be doing the same thing a century later."

Last April, following three years as Barrows' apprentice, the Barrows Watch Repair sign on the shop, located on State Street just off Route 1, was taken down. It now reads Louie's Watch Repair. Next month, Barrows, who still comes into work each day, will officially retire. Though the shop now bears Louie's name, Joe will be leaving virtually everything behind, including his father's cabinet and, not least, his influence on Fafard.

"I'm not changing a thing about this place," says Fafard, who waves off any expressions of wonder at what he's accomplished. "Sure, it took a bad thing to make this all happen. Or maybe there's a reason I never forgot about my grandfather's pocket watch."

*Louie's Watch Repair, 115 State Street Guilford 203-453-6991*