

# CHANGING GEARS

Atlanta native moves from social work to car repair

By Diana Schub

Catherine Simpson is striving to feature a full range of services in her new auto-repair shop. There will, however, be one element missing: No pinups. Period.

Woman-owned and operated, Catherine's Auto Repair has a female-friendly atmosphere. "I want it to be the kind of place women will feel comfortable taking their cars, and that they'll leave me with a total feeling of trust without worrying about being ripped off," said Catherine, 33. "I remember feeling helpless and mistreated when something went wrong with my car."

She quickly points out that she believes there are a lot of well-respected auto shops owned by men, and that she hopes to attract both men and women by offering high-quality and reputable service. "My motto is 'Respect for you and your car,'" she said.

But sometimes those shops can be intimidating to women, especially since many women aren't familiar with the configurations of a carburetor or the intricacies of an engine.

Catherine was once in that automotive never-never land herself. A native Atlantan, she graduated in 1989 with a degree in social work from Georgetown University and then worked with troubled children, eventually making her way to Seattle. Automotive repair was the furthest thing from her mind, she said. "I'd never thought I'd do anything like this. I didn't grow up with this; the most I ever did was pump my own gas."

Feeling stressed and burned out with her emotionally charged occupation, a class in basic trade skills caught her eye one day. It was offered by a program called ANEW – Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Experience for Women – and was geared toward low-income women, Catherine explained. The training gave students some good experience in various trades that, in turn, could improve their earning potential.

"I discovered I really liked working with

my hands, and that I really liked mechanics," Catherine said.

She spent the next nine years developing her skills through apprenticeships – and found that having a career with tangible results was very rewarding. "In social work, you work with someone for a year and you're not sure you've helped them. At the end of the day, I can say I fixed two transmissions," she explained. "Social work is so emotional; [auto repair] is concrete."

Earlier this year, she heard that Pete Levine, owner of Pete Levine Auto Repair on Piedmont Circle, was interested in selling his business. Catherine purchased it and officially opened for business in mid-October. "I had just been looking for a place for months," she said. "It's hard to find a place inside the perimeter."

So far, Catherine said, the response has been positive. "But people are still shocked to see a woman in mechanic's clothes," she said.

In addition to providing auto services, Catherine said she hopes someday to offer a similar program to ANEW, adding that she's heard only about one half of one percent of mechanics are women. Why more women aren't interested in the profession puzzles Catherine; strength has nothing to do with the work, she said, because there are so many tools and types of equipment available. "I think women just aren't geared to think this way," she said. She added, however, that she does believe that as cars get more complicated and require more specialized skills, the profession will prove more appealing to women; "It's not as greasy as it used to be," she said.

Catherine has already seen some small changes, especially compared to her early days as the only female mechanic in a shop of all men. She remembered sitting at lunch one day when a salesman from a parts company came to deliver Christmas gifts to all the mechanics – calendars of scantily-clad women. He took one look at Catherine, realized the gift was inappropriate for her and said, "I can give you a hat." Another time, a




CINDY SPROUL

Catherine Simpson says she one day hopes to offer an apprenticeship program out of her auto shop, Catherine's Auto Repair on Piedmont Circle.

customer walked into the shop and said to the owner, "You've got a mechanic-ette."

Catherine did have the opportunity to apprentice in a woman-owned shop in Virginia last year. It wasn't much different from the other auto repair shops she'd worked in, Catherine said, "but we just all felt more comfortable with each other." She added that the women seemed more inclined to work as a team and "were a little more willing to admit when they didn't know the answer."

In addition to an ANEW-type program,

Catherine plans to offer classes about basic car maintenance and how to handle emergencies. She said she also wants to hire female mechanics, a goal she's had trouble reaching. "I'm just trying to support women," she said. "I'm not against men." 

*Catherine's Auto Repair is located at 1916 Piedmont Circle, off Cheshire Bridge Road. Hours are Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Call 404-875-7212 for more information.*

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