

# Business on a small scale

*Every other Tuesday: People at work for themselves*

## Mechanic fights sexism, opens shop of her own

By **CHRISTINE VAN DUSEN**  
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Catherine Simpson has come a long way since co-workers put a dead rat on her work table, welcoming her to the “man’s world” of auto repair in 1992.

“I didn’t want to complain,” says Simpson, now 34. “I had a goal in mind.”

In October of 2000, she achieved it, opening her own shop: Catherine’s Automotive Repair & Service in Atlanta.

What once made Simpson an anomaly and an outcast is now contributing to her success.

“In general, this industry has a bad name for itself, unfortunately, treating customers badly,” says Russ Sauer, who works in Simpson’s shop. “They’re coming here, maybe looking for something different.”

Simpson’s shop isn’t much different from most, really. The white-walled waiting room is of the typical bland variety. But instead of Popular Mechanics or a



BEN GRAY / Staff

**Catherine Simpson, shown with her dog, Maggie, no longer works on cars because of business demands.**

years-old Reader’s Digest, there are shiny, new magazines on the table: Vegetarian Life, InStyle, Rosie.

A calendar in the break room features a monthly photo of a classic car. Absent,

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# Mechanic fights anti-female bias

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though, is the naked blonde draped across the hood.

Then, of course, there's Simpson, pacing behind the counter while eating a veggie wrap, talking on the phone and sorting invoices. She listens patiently when people ask, "Honey, can I speak to your supervisor?"

"I am the supervisor," she'll say. "I own the place. You want to speak to a mechanic? I am a mechanic."

This is a familiar exchange for Simpson, and she understands why. Women account for less than 1 percent of the nation's 431,050 certified mechanics, according to recent surveys.

Simpson doesn't mind being part of this tiny minority, now that she has what she's wanted: independence, empowerment and the chance to fix what's broken.

Losing all that would be worse than never having it. So Simpson is making sacrifices — letting her guitar and hiking boots gather dust, missing movies with friends and dropping out of the dating scene — to focus on her business.

"It's an independent shop," Sauer says. "If the shop fails, we'll be out of a job. For her, there's more at stake."

About 24 cars a day keep Simpson's three mechanics busy. They're all men. She couldn't find any women to work in the garage, she says.

Simpson doesn't have time to look under the hood anymore; she spends at least 14 hours a day trying to keep the business humming. The shop — which doesn't try to compete on price — does about \$50,000 in monthly revenue and should turn a profit soon, she says.

It seems the difficult economy is helping matters, as most car owners want to keep their vehicles running so they won't have to buy new. Still, Simpson says: "I always panic. It's busy, but then we'll have a down day, and I'll freak out. Then it gets crazy again. My pride is so tied up in this. It's not an option, to fail."

In the beginning bets were, literally, taken on how soon Simpson would fail. She

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**CATHERINE SIMPSON**  
Owner of auto repair business

knows she may seem an unlikely grease monkey — an outdoorsy vegan who grew up in Buckhead, graduated from Georgetown University and had a first job as a counselor for at-risk adolescents.

That job "made me cry all the time," Simpson says. "I never knew if I was making a difference in their lives."

Her gut, in knots, told her it was time to quit. She did so without a plan. Then she read about a six-month program on plumbing, welding, electrician's skills and basic auto repair. Without another thought, Simpson signed up.

The first reaction from friends and family was: huh?

"It's the greatest feeling when you fix something," Simpson explains. "With social work, you never really know if you're making a difference. You can't fix things. I wanted to take a problem, fix it and have something to show for it."

On her way to class one day, Simpson's 1985 Mazda 626 started misbehaving. Not yet sure how to fix a car, she went to a mechanic. He rambled on about "CV joints" and didn't look her in the eye.

"I hated not knowing what he was talking about," she says.

So Simpson resolved to become an auto mechanic. She started in 1992 as a trainee, rebuilding transmissions, and soon was promoted to manage an all-male shop.

That's where she found the rat gift on her work table.

Simpson put up with that, she says, "because I had a plan: to learn everything I could and then move on."

Her next job was at an all-male dealership, where there was no women's bathroom.

"At another place I worked, the parts guys would try to get more business by bringing in calendars of naked women. Or I'd call for jobs and everyone would ask if I was calling for my husband, brother or boyfriend," she says. "They thought I didn't belong."

Now, it doesn't feel so bad to be an oddity. People still stammer when they hear what she does for a living. Then they ask for her card.

If you know of an interesting small business or entrepreneur in the Atlanta area, contact Christine Van Dusen at [cvandusen@ajc.com](mailto:cvandusen@ajc.com). Businesses must be at least a year old, and the owners must be able to demonstrate they are producing revenue.

The Informatics Remed

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## TIPS FOR WOMEN STARTING BUSINESSES

Here are some tips for women who want to start businesses within male-dominated industries:

