

## O'Fallon Progress

### Heritage Award: 40 years of obstacles and growth keeps Shiloh's Distler's going strong

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The Village of Shiloh's Distler Auto Repair is this year's Heritage Award through the 2015 O'Fallon-Shiloh Chamber of Commerce Salute to Business Awards.

The Village of Shiloh's Distler Auto Repair isn't going anywhere any time soon, and is going strong after 40 years as a local, family owned and operated auto shop—earning the business this year's Heritage Award through the 2015 O'Fallon-Shiloh Chamber of Commerce Salute to Business awards.

"This is quite the accomplishment in my book, we feel great about it," owner Bob Distler said. "I've seen an awful lot of them come and go, and trained a bunch of auto technicians in this area and a lot of them have even opened their own businesses or deployed in the military, and come back and still use us as their mechanic of choice."

Seeing the faces and times change over the last four decades, Distler reminisces the good 'ole days when things were simpler, "it's been tough (because) everything is all computerized and electrical now, but when I started in 1975 with my two-bay service station across the street, I was lucky enough to have bought out the previous owner's inventory and equipment for about \$7,500, which that wasn't a small deal back in those days, but it isn't anything like it is today. If a guy wanted to start a business these days he'd be stuck or bankrupt before he even began (because) of initial costs and competition alone."

Distler's business began as Distler's 66 Service with three full service gas pumps—two regular unleaded and one premium—to now, no pumps and thousands of dollars in updated software alone, and much more in computer equipment to diagnose certain vehicles.

"Today, these cars take such specialized parts and care, especially a lot of the European models, you can't put some of the parts on without programming them to the computer," Distler explained. "Kind of like going to the hospital and having something replaced—it has to be the right blood type, certain size and genetics and everything. If we don't have the software, we can't do anything with it, but we keep up with all that.

"Even a younger Jimmy Vernier, actually most of the Vernier boys come to think about it, have earned their grease at my shop back when it was still the service station across the way (now is a Circle K gas station, no longer owned by Distler)," Distler noted with a grin. "Jimmy was one of my best employees I ever had and worked hard, just like he does now as Mayor of Shiloh."

According to Distler, then, with a population of Shiloh at 500, gas prices at \$0.50 per gallon and a barrel of crude oil selling for \$13 a barrel, rumors were flying that gas would rise to a whopping \$1.00 per gallon.

"People began to trade in their big gas guzzling cars for an economical foreign car like Toyota, Nissan and Fiats," Distler explained. "(I) trained at a foreign car dealership and enjoyed working on imports, (plus) there were only five auto repair shops in the metro area that would work on imports at the time."

Working long 14-hour days, seven days a week, Distler built his business from the ground up, literally.

"It's been a long road, but I wouldn't change a thing," Distler said with a chuckle. "I've learned a lot, done a lot and am keepin' up still, with the help of my loyal staff of course."

In the 1980's, Distler and his wife Carolyn, converted the gas station to a convenience store and also built a new auto repair building across the street, where it still stands today.

"Now I have three certified technicians working full time and other staff that are familiar with our repeat customers that know the history of the cars we work on and that's important," Distler said.

Located at the corner of Cross Street and North Main Street, in the heart of 'old Shiloh,' Distler's continues to increase its customer base every day by word-of-mouth and referrals, Distler said, "is the best way to do it so people know you will provide great service because we've already done it for their friends or family."

Although the shop is not as large in size as a multi-location, corporate entity in the industry, Distler's is not lacking in notoriety or reputation in the area, said B.J. Berger, shop manager for the last 15 years and long-time worker of 27 years. Berger also holds a seat on the Shiloh Village Planning Commission board.

"We do good here. It's been very rewarding," Berger said. "The big key is the people coming through our doors over and over again. They know that when they come here that we're going to take care of them and treat them like we would our own family—the right way."