



You're a what?

Cobbler

by Kathleen Green

Cobbler Jeremy Meritt saves soles, one shoe at a time. He also mends heels, uppers, buckles, clasps, and other components of shoes and boots that are in need of repair.

"I rarely find something that I can't fix," says Jeremy. "I tend to take on more headaches than maybe I should, and those might take a little longer. But it's rare that I see something I just can't do."

Although cobblers are shoe repairers and sometimes shoemakers, their repertoire extends beyond shoes. They handle everything from fabric to plastic to wood. Jeremy, for example, once created a corkscrew tail for a pig-shaped footstool. Working with his wife, Elaine, he regularly repairs luggage, belts, handbags, briefcases, and other objects; occasionally, they get calls for in-home furniture repair.

But the bulk of Jeremy's work involves rebuilding or replacing the soles of shoes. Customers bring their tattered footwear to his Morton, Illinois, store and describe what they'd like done. Jeremy explains how he'll fix the problem, notes the details on a work ticket, and reaches a price agreement with the customer.

Like most cobblers, Jeremy has set prices for routine jobs. He usually charges \$35 per pair for full sole replacement, for example, and about \$12 per pair for heel repair. Complex jobs are more, primarily to cover the cost of the extra materials required.

The first step in repairing most shoes is tearing them down: stripping away worn pieces to get to the usable base. Jeremy begins most workdays by gathering all the shoes, lining them up, and making his way along the row of footwear. One by one, using a knife or other tools, he removes old pieces and discards them.

Then, he takes the shoes to a large sanding machine. Sanding eliminates leftover particles, creating a clean but rough surface for rebuilding; glue bonds better to rough surfaces than to smooth ones. He also cuts, custom sizes, and sands the replacement parts for each shoe.

Rebuilding is next. Jeremy prepares adhesives for gluing the new pieces to the shoes. Rapidly drying glues allow little room for error, so Jeremy works down the line of shoes quickly to apply the adhesives and assemble the parts.

Long ago, cobblers hammered nails and stitched threads to hold the parts of a shoe together. Some cobblers today still use those traditional methods, but Jeremy is among those who rely on adhesives instead of nails.

For these modern cobblers, nails are obsolete and stitching is largely decorative. "Glue technology has improved so much over the years," says Jeremy, "that the bond the glue creates is actually stronger than the shoe itself."

After the glue dries and sets, Jeremy adds the finish-

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ing touches: trimming and sanding the new pieces to blend with the original parts, applying polish and sealant, and shining and buffing each shoe until it gleams. He might also need to use ink or dye, depending on the material, to match the new parts with the original color.

Dyes contain acetone, a flammable liquid that can cause eye irritation, and adhesives have dangerous vapors in them. Cobblers wear safety goggles to protect their eyes both from chemical splashes and from fine dust generated by the sander. They also need to keep their workspace well ventilated to guard against the long-term health consequences of inhaling chemicals.

Most sole or heel replacements or repairs take about 35 minutes from start to finish. But Jeremy usually estimates a 2-day turnaround for customer pickup because he prefers to group his work by task rather than by individual project. In this way, he can divide his day into teardowns, rebuilding or repairing, and finishing—and still have time to work on items other than shoes.

Once in a while, a customer asks Jeremy to create something from scratch, such as a pouch or coin case. “Those are fun, if I have the time,” he says. But Jeremy also works as a paramedic, so on the days he’s in his store, he’s usually busy doing repair work and meeting with customers.

Jeremy uses communication skills and sales ability in dealing with customers. As a store owner, he also needs skills such as accounting and marketing to keep up with payroll, insurance, advertising, and related tasks of running a business. These skills are in addition to the manual dexterity, mechanical aptitude, and mathematical and problem-solving ability that all cobblers need to repair shoes and other items.

Few formal training programs exist to prepare cobblers for the occupation. Most learn on the job; Jeremy, for example, trained under his stepfather’s supervision and gradually took over the business when his stepfather retired. “This is one of those trades where you just have to dig in and do it,” says Jeremy. “Once you learn it, you could go anywhere.”

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that in May 2006, there were 7,450 shoe and leather workers and repairers employed throughout the country. Their median salaries were \$20,450. These data include wage and salary workers only and do not count those, like Jeremy, who are self-employed.

The small number of cobblers shows the limited demand for their services. For many

people, it’s more economically feasible to buy new shoes than to repair old ones. But for other people, it’s more practical to refurbish expensive designer shoes than to purchase new ones, especially if the style is no longer available. And, says Jeremy, growing numbers of people understand the environmental advantages of repairing used goods.

Jeremy speculates that there’s little public awareness about what cobblers do—or that they’re still around. He stays visible in his community by repairing banners, supplying material scraps, and providing other services to schools and civic groups.

His customers value this community involvement. Jeremy has owned the store since 1998, but the business has been a fixture in Morton since 1959. “I get people who come in because they appreciate the whole family-run aspect of the business,” he says. “I might be more progressive in my methods than other shops, but it’s continuing the tradition that I like best.” ∞



Original photo of Jeremy Meritt by Think Vu