

Narrative: Dave Abraham, Bike Shop Owner, Hokie Spokes

Blacksburg, Virginia

Interviewers: Paul Lascko, Nicholas Piccollelli

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I'm Dave Abraham and I'm 58. I'm the owner of this business, which is New Wheel and Hokie Spokes [*holds up a finger for us to wait when a customer enters*]. I've had the bike shop since 1980. Just a minute... [*speaks with customer*]. OK, family background. Grew up in Christiansburg, normal heterosexual parents. My father had a small business like me. He's a better business man than me, I believe. And my mother was a schoolteacher and a guidance counselor. I kind of got into [cycling]... 'bout probably the age of the average college student--about when I was 21. Didn't think I'd ever open a shop like Hokie Spokes. I went to Radford University. I'm one of the first men to ever go to Radford and we still have a bike shop in Radford, we started with the bike shop in Radford.

It's a a tough environment for a bike shop. This business is challenging because the profit margins are very tight. The thing about bicycles is that, in general, they're very similar from brand to brand. I don't think we have problems, per se. I think that many more bikes are sold on the Internet and various ways. And they're sold at places, mass market, like Target and Walmart. So it's so competitive that it's very challenging. I know how much capital I used to start the business and it wasn't very much. It was a little over \$4,000. Payroll is a major expense. The biggest expense is the lease payment, the rent. Yup, landlords are very tough in Blacksburg. This spot [on College Avenue], it's good for walk-by traffic. It, uh, it's a little smaller than I would have preferred.

I work six days a week and certain days of the week I'm doing athletic activities which I get in closer to lunch time. But the most days I'm here at ten or twelve and I work till six or seven or eight. In general, probably eight hours Monday, Tuesday more like 9 hours, Wednesday probably seven hours, Thursday 9 hours, Friday seven hours, Saturday probably 9 hours. And I work at home as well, online, just for fun. That's probably about fifty hours a week. People often say to me, don't work too hard. I say, I don't work hard; I work long. None of it's really tough if you kind of like what you're doin', more than most businesses where you can punch out and go home. Since you're the owner it's not so easy to walk away. I like helping people to be healthy and I am sort of a missionary for cycling. I believe in bikes, so it's somewhat easy for me to sell 'em.

I'd tell you what I'd like to do, but I'm not sure if I could make a living doing it. It's more of a hobby for me, which is bird photography. I have one [camera] my dad gave me, which is a Canon with a pretty nice lens. It's likely that I'll keep doing it for a while. Um, yeah, I'd rather be a bird

photographer, but on the other hand, you know, it's questionable whether I can make a living doing that. The place that I often go to with my father is--he's much more into it than I am because he has more time--is in Radford below the dam near the New River. You can get pictures of ducks and herrings and stuff like that. I haven't been there in... too much.

I'm very fortunate to have a relationship with a woman who is very patient with me, in terms of bringing in my fair share of the money. She has a good job and she has a large share of the work around the house as well as bringing in the majority of the money, so. So I'm really blessed in that regard. To be able to do something that I like to do and yet putter around at it but she, you know, she's not the sort that actually complains out loud. It would be nice to make more money at this. Well, I'm on the boat and we're movin' somewhere or the other and I can't get out. I mean it's not so easy to change course in mid-stream....

It's a lot of fun helping Hokies. I like everything right down to the motto of the school is pretty neat. If I'm gonna be successful in retail I feel like serving people is very important. There are issues with Tech. I think the bureaucracy is tone deaf sometimes. There is a lot of bureaucracy.

With the April shootings, one of the people shot was a client of mine. So yeah, that was as close as it came to impacting me; but I think it was emotionally traumatic for everyone that has a little bit of compassion and humanity about them. You know, there was a time when our sales were off because of it. Which, you know, so what. Which, of course, even things such as bad weather can impact sales. You know when Tech closes down for a month in the winter time for Christmas break it's challenging from a financial standpoint because we still have our monthly expenses like rent and lights and phone bill. And, you know, we're not doin' as much business. The best time for us is back-to-school. Summer is ok, it's really the winter that we should be cutting back....I have to do something real quick [*steps out to do something in the shop*]. Ok, I'm good.

It's always fun meeting different people with different attitudes and beliefs. I've helped a woman fix her wheelchair, which she could keep on going. But then, I've had landlords from hell, one that threatened to sue me 'cuz I told him I was tired of him harassing me and that I was gonna beat him up. I'm not a real violent type of person, so this was like the landlord from hell. They sued me for damage to their building and they lost pretty badly but they get some money that I don't feel they earned, but it's water under the dam. These are slumlords, which anybody at Tech is probably familiar with. My impression is that, this is just anecdotal but, some kid rents an apartment. And there's a mark on the wall and he doesn't write it down or he doesn't know to annotate it, or she, and then at the end of the term the landlord charges him for that mark and probably charged ten

previous people for the same mark. I feel like a lot of landlords prey on the Tech students. Because a lot of Tech students will just get mom and dad to pay for it and won't stand up to a landlord. There's certain landlords that I would be reluctant to rent from again. I'm Jewish, and he once called me an Old World Jew. I think that the guy's just a pain in the ass. And is nasty to everyone. I don't think that it's the fact that I'm Jewish that he treated me any worse or better than anyone else.

I was very naïve and I thought that I would start a bike shop and work hard a couple months and money would really come in. I have never run it really well as a business and it's to my own detriment. I should really do more with the books. I should do more planning. And yet my skills are more in the way of fixing the bikes, so I tend to neglect some of the more important and managerial functions. At a certain level, part of me likes being on the edge. Part of me likes the adrenaline rush of running into a bill you have forgotten about.

There is nothing more profitable in the bike shop than renting the bikes. And in this regard we're quite different than most other bike shops. We will rent any bike in here. I feel like it's important dealing with people to try to help them overcome their fear of buying the wrong thing. Because we allow rental payments to be credited towards purchase, a person can rent a red bike one week and a green bike the next week. Whatever money that they pay us accrues and deducts from if and when they buy a bike. It's a policy that is fairly unique and that works for us. I figured it out after a while, just looking at how I would like to be treated if I were a customer.

I'm happy with this, I'm happy with myself. But it's not an easy gig. Starting out, I thought that selling was something negative you did *to* someone rather than *for* them. I had to learn to be a salesperson. But uh, the American Dream... I think we live in overall the greatest country in the world, but on the other hand I think our country has many issues and problems. I like to joke that we have the best government that money can buy. The pressures on small businesses right now are extreme. And I don't think that things are gonna get much better in our foreseeable future. So if I had some sugar daddy come in and want to buy the place I would quit, if the money was right.

I had a client recently say that I was a little bit ADHD. You know I tend to do two or three things at the same time, which probably makes me less effective than I might otherwise be. Unfortunately, it's been more of a hobby than a job. Any normal person would have quit by now. Compensation is not just about money. It's also about knowing you've helped someone, knowing that you've done a good job, and in that sense it's very rewarding. But financially it hasn't been.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.