

NEWS

New Year brings retirement farewell for local mechanic

By ERIC JOHNSON
ASST. EDITOR

The calendar-flipping transition from the old year to the new is traditionally a time of celebration — the stuff of noise-makers, streamers and party hats, colorful fireworks, midnight champagne toasts, and the melodic strains of “Old Lang Syne.”

While Gary Valkenaar, the longtime 43-year owner of Auto & Tire Clinic, Inc., quietly slipped into retirement on Dec. 30 as he turned the “open” sign to “closed” for the final time at his full service Eagle River auto repair garage, the new year turn of his life story to a new chapter with 2022’s arrival is no less dramatic than the typical New Year’s hoopla.

Valkenaar was well-suited from an early age for a career as a mechanic as “an Erector Set kind of kid, probably starting when I was eight, nine years old.”

“I was fixing everything my mother broke,” he recalled with a laugh. “I was interested in everything that tick-tocked, anything that was mechanical, electrical. I took many things apart and put them back together just for the fun of it, just to see how they worked, right down to my toy trains. I took my locomotive apart one afternoon because I had to know how it worked — and then I put it back together.”

Those early formative experiences led to a lifelong interest — and career — for Valkenaar.

“I love fixing things,” he said. “I’ve always been one for tinkering. It’s in my nature. I’m a gearhead, a nuts and bolts and gears kind of guy. The biggest part of this trade is you’ve got to be able to troubleshoot properly to get the end result to fix it, to make it better, to make it work again. You’ve got to know what’s wrong. I guess that’s my forte. It comes natural. Either you’ve got it or you don’t.”

After graduating from Eagle River Union High School in 1971, Valkenaar continued his studies in the 2-year auto trade school program at Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton.

Valkenaar then headed to the desert southwest, working as a mechanic in Phoenix for 2-1/2 years, with Colorado as a stopping point, but he soon returned home to the North Woods.

“It was too hot — I worked two summers down there and that was enough,” he recalled. “We were up at five in the morning and we couldn’t work past noon, one o’clock. We were ‘The Baker Boys’ because we all wore white. We worked in an outdoor shop with just a roof over our heads. That was pretty trying.”

Valkenaar said he was tipped off by his dad about a vacant auto repair garage back home in Eagle River.

“My dad caught wind of it and said, ‘Hey, there’s possibly an opportunity,’” he recalled. “It was kind of like ‘Wizard of Oz. Click your heels, ‘There’s no place like home.’”

Obtaining the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. franchise for Eagle River, Valkenaar reopened the shop and put up his Auto & Tire Clinic shingle along Highway 70 West in June 1978.

“It was a dream to run my own repair shop,” he noted.

Initially leasing a quarter of the building, Valkenaar began renting additional units in the building as they became available to house his growing business. Renting the entire building at 322 W. Pine St. a decade later, Valkenaar struck a deal to purchase the building outright, later putting on a two-bay addition in the back. Additional help was added as the business grew over the years, at its peak a team that included Valkenaar, four mechanics and a lady to run the office and greet customers at the reception desk.

“I built it up from the ground up, slow but sure,” Valkenaar said of his full service Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) certified repair garage. “This was an excellent run — 43, almost 44 years. I’ve been blessed by the people in this town.”

Customers were drawn to Auto & Tire Clinic from a wide swath of the North Woods — south to Rhineland, west to Minocqua and north of the border to Watersmeet and Iron River, Mich.

Valkenaar credited his shop’s popularity and success over the years to his approach to customer care.

“I’m very upfront and very honest,” he said, noting some longtime clients had been with him upwards of 35, 40 years. “The key is to tell them like it is. I’m very straightforward. People in this area appreciate that.”

While eagerly embracing his new life in retirement, closing down Auto & Tire Clinic in the process wasn’t part of Valkenaar’s original plans. He had hoped to sell the business to a like-minded entrepreneur who would have perpetuated and built on the repair shop’s legacy.

While he holds out hope that “somebody comes along in the next month or two and decides to fire this place back up,” Valkenaar concedes he’s “not optimistic” about the prospects, citing the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, now starting its third year.

“If I would have decided [to retire] a year before Covid, I think it would have been a completely different story,” he said. “It seems like Covid has



The new year brings life in retirement for Auto & Tire Clinic owner Gary Valkenaar. —Staff Photos By ERIC JOHNSON

put a damper on a lot of things and it’s really gonna screw up a lot of things. You’re already seeing the supply [chain] problems. It all trickles down. Everybody’s afraid about the economy. The media’s got everyone so scared of different things. Who really knows what’s up ahead? All you ever hear about is Covid, Covid, Covid, Covid, Covid.”

As it was, Valkenaar said the well-documented labor woes since Covid’s 2020 arrival, dubbed “The Great Resignation” by the national media, had made running Auto & Tire Clinic an increasingly challenge.

“Look at all the ‘help wanted’ signs,” he said. “Nobody wants to work. I’ve been trying to find a technician for two years.”

It’s a problem that perplexes Valkenaar, who cut his teeth in the workforce as a teen delivering laundered goods to summer camps and performing maintenance work at Seifert’s Laundry, and working pit, landscaping and mason-tending duties for Richter Brothers Redi Mix.

“I’ve been working since I was 14,” he said. “I’ve always had a job.”

Our interview in Auto & Tire Clinic’s waiting room was interrupted periodically by a stream of well-wishing longtime customers, including Keith Slizewski of Eagle River.

“He’s honest and truthful,” Slizewski said of Valkenaar. “We’ve had a good relationship. He knows what he’s doing. I’m definitely sorry to see him go. He’s got a capable crew.”

While Valkenaar won’t miss the rigors of running a six-day-a-week year-round business — “all I do is work and I go home” — he will miss his many customers.

“I’ll miss the people, the many, many friends,” he said, noting he hopes to still connect with his former customers around town at the supermarket and community events. “I’ll miss a lot of the faces.”

Valkenaar said he’ll also miss the relationships built over the years in the service bay working alongside his technicians.

“It became a brotherhood in here,” he said, surveying Auto & Tire Clinic’s service bay.

Turning his sights ahead to retirement, Valkenaar plans to stay busy. His wife, Constance, retired two years ago from a 38-year career working for Vilas County, the last 26 as administrative assistant in the Forestry, Recreation and Land Department.

“I’m not gonna be bored — there’s always home projects,” he said.

And a good deal of travel is also in the offing.

“I’ve got a pretty good ‘bucket list’ of places I’d like to

go,” Valkenaar said. “I’d like to do some traveling. My wife would love to do some traveling. People always dream of these really exotic vacations, but there’s so much to see right here in the U.S.A. There are so many great national parks in this country I’d like to see. Really, it all boils down to some nice traveling.”

Valkenaar said he and his wife favor the spontaneity of unstructured travel open to on-the-road serendipity.

“We’re not ones to plan trips,” he explained. “We’re not that way at all. For us, it’s like, ‘Okay, the car is loaded. Which way are we going?’ We have never really ever planned anything to a ‘T.’ We’ve had some wild adventures in our lives because we don’t plan anything. We just kind of take it as it comes. Never been disappointed with that theory. We always find some of the best things you can’t even dream about. It just happens. We just go with the flow.”

Covid FROM PAGE 1A

be difficult, but Dreger said she felt they had the authority to get a court order.

Dreger surveyed board members as to how her department should do public vaccination clinics saying, “We signed up to do testing but we need to determine how we could do it outside either through the sheriff’s department sally-port or at our front entrance.”

Board member Ron Kresin strongly supported more testing opportunities and the board adopted a motion supporting testing by the public health department with a location to be determined.

Omicron, testing demands stress outpatient settings

The latest chapter in the Covid-19 pandemic is being written by the Omicron variant and it extends beyond the walls of area hospitals.

According to Aspirus Health, the latest surge and demand for Covid-19 testing, combined with increased levels of other seasonal illness such as influenza, is significantly impacting outpatient settings such as family health clinics and emergency departments.

Omicron has taken over as the dominant variant and it’s fueling increased volumes in emergency department and outpatient settings.

“We have been seeing very high volumes of patients that have been coming to us for either Covid testing or treatment of Covid-related symptoms,” said Andrea Allard, Aspirus vice president of operations for Aspirus Medical Group. “We saw a significant spike right around the week of Christmas and we’ve really maintained those high volumes.”

The number of Covid-19 tests administered since Jan. 1 has at least doubled across all clinics in the Aspirus Health

system compared to the last two weeks in December.

Aspirus also saw a 62% increase in Covid-19 tests administered between Dec. 1, 2021 and Jan. 16, 2022, compared to the same period the previous year.

“This is causing us to dedicate more resources to Covid-19,” said Allard. “At the same time, we’re facing the same staffing challenges as everyone else. So, we continue to need to do more with less.”

Patients can help alleviate the stress on outpatient clinics and emergency departments by utilizing the MyAspirus app to access test results, schedule E-Visits and manage appointments.

Patients are also asked to only go to an emergency department if they need emergent care.

“Be kind, be patient,” said Allard. “We are really doing our best to make sure that we rise up and meet the needs of our patients.”

Anyone can get more information on Covid-19 vaccinations, booster shots, scheduling information and more at aspirus.org/covid-19-vaccineinfo.

Unemployment 1099 tax forms now online

The Department of Workforce Development (DWD) is reminding people in the North Woods who received Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits last year that they must report UI benefits as taxable income on their 2021 tax returns, and that their 1099-G income tax statements for the year are easily accessible through UI’s secure and confidential online system.

Unemployment benefits including Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC), Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC), Mixed Earner Unemployment Compensation (MEUC), Lost Wages Assistance (LWA) and Extended Benefits (EB) are considered taxable income for a claimant received during the previous year.

To access 1099-G tax statements, claimants can go to the 1099-G Tax Information page at dwd.wisconsin.gov/uiben/1099.htm, then follow a few easy steps to obtain an electronic copy of their 2021 benefit payment records.

In response to customer service trends toward the convenience of online self-service,

claimants who have logged onto UI’s online claimant portal are being notified their 1099-G statements for 2021 will be accessible online and that they should not expect to be mailed paper copies. Claimants who have been granted a long-term exception to using online services will receive their 1099-G statements by mail. DWD will continue to mail paper copies upon request.

By accessing UI’s secure, confidential online benefit system and obtaining 1099-G forms electronically, claimants will have immediate access to their tax information for UI. Additionally, the transition from paper mailings to e-copies of 1099-G forms saves the public tens of thousands of dollars in annual processing, printing, and mailing costs.

DWD securely stores 1099-G forms online for all claimants to access and print for their records. Claimants’ statements are available online for the past six years, which is helpful if claimants have to file amended tax returns. The UI Division is required to send 1099-G information to the Internal Revenue Service and the Wisconsin Department of Revenue.

For more information and frequently asked questions, visit the 1099-G Tax Information page listed above.



Auto & Tire Clinic owner Gary Valkenaar hopes to sell his Hwy. 70 West auto repair shop to a like-minded entrepreneur.

— ATTENTION —

“We cannot trust the board and administrator to do what is right for our students as per the CRT and other insidious political incursions into their curriculum. Therefore we also cannot trust and reward them with \$13.8 million to keep doing what they want. Parents and taxpayers never heard a word from any dissenting board member when the administrator trained the staff in implementing CRT in our school. Only when caught by observant parents did we learn of the porn in the library and political racial dividing CRT being introduced into the curriculum. They are not sorry they did it, they are only sorry they got caught. We cannot respect and reward such a devious board and administrator. VOTE NO ON THE REFERENDUM AND LET US REPLACE THE COMPLICIT SCHOOL BOARD WITH NEW RESPONSIBLE MEMBERS.”

1069

Paid for by the “Vote No on the Referendum Committee”,
John Lumley, Treasurer

CORRECTION

An ad regarding the Northland Pines School District referendum placed in the Jan. 19 edition did not correctly disclose the source of information/opinion, as required by Wisconsin State Statute. The ad was provided by the “VOTE NO ON THE REFERENDUM COMMITTEE”, John Lumley, Treasurer.

The News-Review apologizes for the error.

1066