

One immediately feels at home entering Rex's Barber Shop in Roanoke.

Rex Ottinger stands beside his trusty barber chair. It's early, but he's already cutting longtime customer Mike's hair.

Mike, eyes closed, peacefully dozes. "He usually sleeps," Rex confides with a grin.

Ed lounges – hands folded – nearby in a wooden chair. Across from him on a table is a large checker board. Local art, photos, an old-fashioned clock and a humorous no-smoking sign adorn the walls.

Rex's shop is open Wednesday through Saturday from 8 a.m. until noon. Haircuts cost \$12.

"I don't push myself like I did 50 years ago," he observes. "I worked 12 hours a day, five days a week, for years and years – from daylight to dark."

Ed remembers it well.

"On Saturdays, he'd always take walk-ins and he'd start at 7 in the morning," he notes. "At about 6:30 a.m., cars would line up out here. When he opened the door, he'd pass out tickets so you knew when to come back."

Chuckling, Rex adds, "It became a competition for some of them to see who could be first."

He doesn't have a phone in his barber shop. Never has. Never will.

"No phone. No TV. No computer. We operate about the same as we did 57 years ago," he remarks. "So many of us older people think it's kind of rude to be interrupted to answer the phone. Plus, my system of scheduling the next hair cut when customers leave works very well. And surprisingly, people don't miss their time to come in."

Suddenly, the door opens and a tall gentleman enters.

"Call me Old Jack," he says wryly upon meeting this *BizVoice*® writer.

What's kept him coming back for more than 25 years?

"Camaraderie. And he does a good job," Jack declares, before joking, "We hope he outlives us. We don't want to go shopping for a new man."

Rex, in his soft-spoken but confident voice, contends that they won't have to.

"I don't look forward to turning the key in the door for the last time," he expresses. "So, I'm still here."

'Cutting' his teeth

Rex grew up in Roanoke. He met wife Mary Sue when he was 20 years old.

"We hadn't dated very long before I decided she was the one," he divulges. "We got married before I went to barber college. I'd saved enough money to pay for a year's rent and she worked in a dime store



RAZOR SHARP

Barber Shares Lifetime of Memories

By Symone C. Skrzycki



in Indianapolis. We've been married 57 years."

"I think it's 100 years," quips Pastor Dick Bunnell, peeking over his newspaper.

Rex graduated from International Barber College in Indianapolis in 1959. He spent a few years in Fort Wayne before returning to his hometown and partnering with others from 1963-1976. At that time, he purchased a former dry cleaning shop on Main Street. He's been there ever since.

Cultural changes have left their mark on the industry. Many barbers went out of business in the 1970s as long hair became a popular style for men. Another milestone: anti-smoking awareness.

"Blue smoke used to roll in here," Rex recalls. "Back whenever everybody first started saying it's not a good idea to smoke, I put up the no-smoking sign. I had some customers that were very disappointed.

"I had one person say, 'You know those hoses they have in the garage? They hook it onto your exhaust. What if we put one of those hoses in so we can blow our smoke?'"

The room erupts in laughter.

Rex's response? An affable smile.

"I said, 'Just step outside. You'll be all right.'"

Pulling together

The Roanoke community has weathered its fair share of storms. Among them was the "flood of '89."

"That's when I had water running from the back door out the front," Rex comments. "Fortunately, I had so many volunteers coming in we were in each other's way. Everything was cleaned up so quickly. I had phone calls where people wanted to come and help."

About a year ago, Rex was hospitalized with a heart-related illness and contracted an infection. He was out of commission for 30 days recovering in a rehabilitation facility in Huntington.

"I had a lot of company. Ed came up to see me," he conveys warmly. "I had several people that never got their hair cut until I got back!"

Shaping memories

In 2013, Rex's granddaughter Maddy joined him at the barbershop.

"It was her first job and she wanted to learn about the barber business," he explains nostalgically. "Now she's working at a salon in Fort Wayne. We had a wonderful time. She has a very sweet personality and got along quite well with the guys."

While spending countless hours doing what he loves, Rex has collected irreplaceable memories.

He reveals a handful:

- Famous visitors: Sen. Dan Coats (received a haircut) and Vice President-elect Mike Pence (Indiana governor at the time). "I didn't cut his (Pence's) hair, but he was in town for an event. Usually when somebody's in town, this is one place they stop."
- Oh baby! "I had a guy run in here. He said, 'My wife's going to have a baby! And she's not going to have it until I get my hair cut.' She waited in the car for him because she didn't want to go to the hospital until he got a haircut."
- Mistaken identity: "One time, an older guy followed a young guy into the shop. As they were waiting, they struck up a conversation. The younger guy – whose hair I cut first – said, 'My dad will pay for my haircut' and left. When it was time to pay, the older man said, 'This is the first time I've ever met that guy!'"

As for the young customer? "I never saw him again."

It's Pastor Bunnell's turn to impart a memory about Rex: "He takes pride in every person that sits in that chair. He's cut so many people's hair for so long, you don't have to tell him how to cut it. You just sit in the chair and he knows."

Rex holds his customers in high regard.

"I have such a great opportunity to see people from all walks of life – pastors, doctors and lawyers," he declares. "If I have a problem with something, I have almost anyone I can turn to. And on top of that, I have all of these friends."



Rex Ottinger, who walks to work at age 77, takes pleasure in cutting hair and cherishes friendships he's formed with customers through the years.