

# Fixing Norwalk's cars for 40 years

## NORWALK

By JOHN H. PALMER  
Hour Correspondent

Believe it or not, there was a time when life was simpler in northern Norwalk.

Traffic on Route 7 wasn't so bad, more like a Sunday drive than a morning commute. There was no Merritt 7 office complex; just a babbling river and a tire store. Wal-Mart hadn't even been invented.

The cars we traveled in were much simpler, too, and much easier to repair. An engine, a couple of spark plugs, four tires, and some oil – that's it. You could drive by any random house on a weekend day and be sure to find a pair of legs sticking out from under a car, belonging to someone working on it in the driveway.

Aaaaah, the good ol' days.

And that's why it's good we have people like Don Layman, who not only remember those days, but has helped us keep driving into modern times.

For close to 40 years, Layman has made a career out of working on automobiles in Norwalk. Remarkably, most of those years have been spent in the same place at West Rocks Shell at the corner of Main Avenue and West Rocks Road. His experience has earned him quite a reputation in Norwalk – a teacher to some, a friend to many, and a go-to choice of mechanic for generations of customers who find their cars too complicated for do-it-yourself jobs.

"The customers here are great," he said. "I've worked on many of these people's cars over the years, and now I'm working on their kids' cars."

The 59-year-old Layman keeps himself looking young and fit, his athletic build a byproduct of a career spent under vehicles twisting wrenches and constantly running around. His office is a garage, filled with the noises of whirring air guns, clinking wrenches, and starting engines. Dangers are constantly there – a falling tire, pinched fingers, exhaust fumes. Holes in the doors help to get rid of the fumes, and ceiling fans help to clear the air. Most of the time, good old fashioned common sense keep him safe.

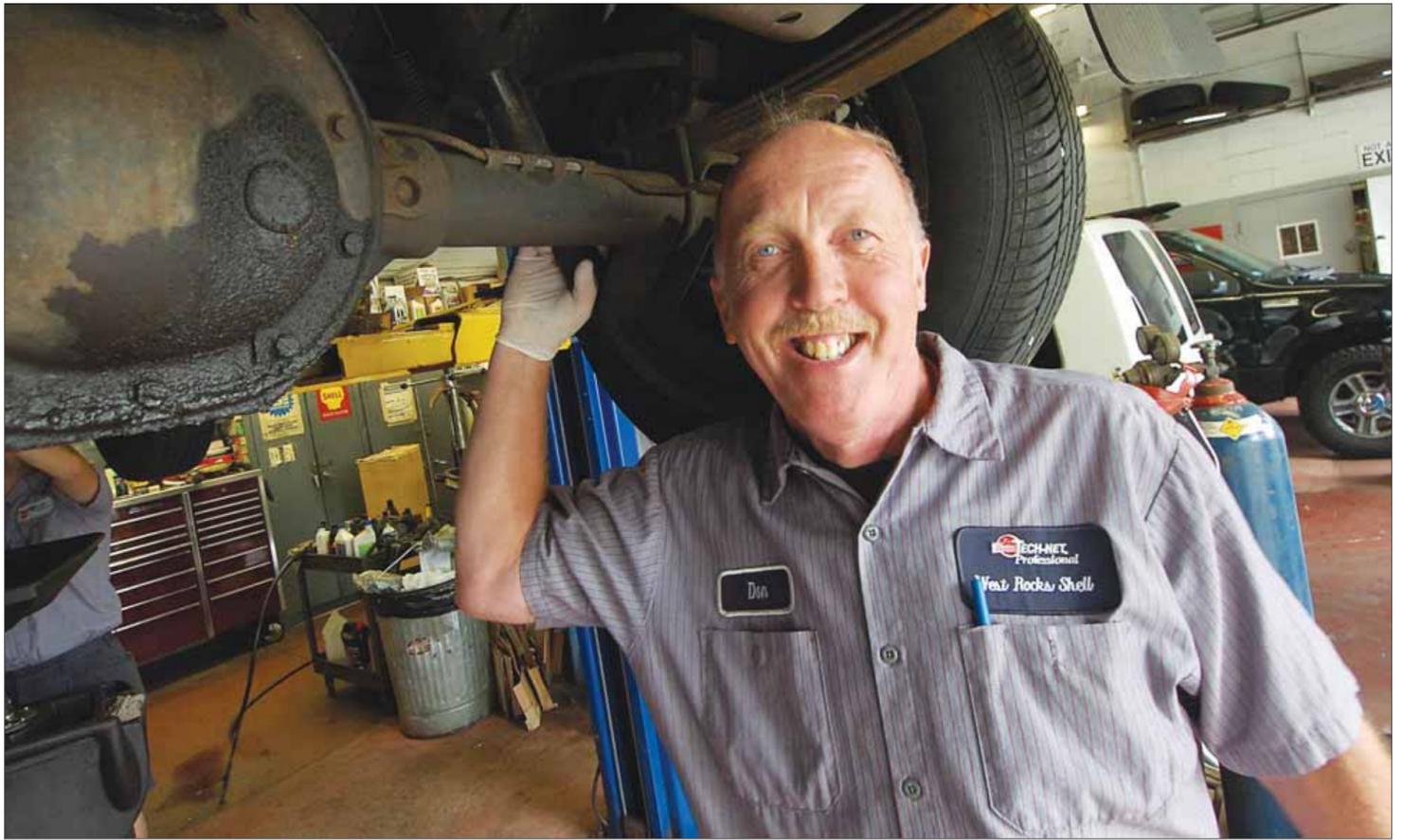
"I once saw a car fall off of a lift, standing on its two wheels," he said. "We are very cautious. As soon as the wheels get off the ground, we stop the lift and look. You are responsible for the car as well as yourself."

His day starts around 6:30 a.m., when he gets into the shop, does some paperwork, and gets an idea of what his workload for the day will be like. By 7 a.m., there's usually a line of 13 customers or more who need their cars worked on – whether it's a tune-up, oil change, new tires, or just a "Check Engine" light that comes on. (Layman says as long as the light is not flashing, it's safe to drive for a while, so don't panic.)

"That's where some of these places get you – it's flashing, so Bang! It's hammer time," he said. "I won't do that. I'd rather have no work than be a thief."

It's that no-nonsense, honest attitude that has earned him his reputation in Norwalk. He has apprenticed many would-be mechanics, some who have gone on to open their own service stations in Norwalk. He prides himself to know that some of his old techs will come back to visit him, and even refer work to him if it requires a more experienced eye. He'll return the favor – if he knows someone who specializes in something, he'll send the work to them.

Born in 1951 in the south end of Stamford, Layman spent most of his early years growing up in the Glenbrook section of the city before graduating Stamford High School in 1969. He enjoyed his carpentry classes there, so he decided to follow his heart and become a carpenter. He joined a union, and became one of the guys who



Veteran Mechanic Don Layman stands underneath a car he is working on at West Rocks Shell.

Hour photo / ALEX VON KLEYDORFF

helped build New Canaan High School. Two years later, he said the building trades feel apart, and he looked elsewhere for work.

"I kept beating up my cars and I learned how to fix them myself," he said. He'd always been a car fanatic, the list of the ones he owned is like a car show at Taylor Farm – Corvairs, Chevilles, Dodge Chargers – and he learned to work on them.

In 1972, he went to work for Larry Ancker, who owned North Avenue Mobil and who himself became a well-known Norwalk owner of service stations in town. Later, Ancker bought Exxon located on Cross Street down the road, and in 1985 West Rocks Shell took roots on Route 7. All along, Layman was the mechanic people came to see to their cars fixed.

"Years ago, you had cars that had points and plugs, and you did a tuneup every 10,000 miles – now you do it every 100,000 miles," he said. "Now, it's more of a challenge because everything is computerized. You have to constantly retrain and update and buy new equipment."

Gone are the days of the corner mechanic who just knew how to fix your car. Layman and the technicians working at West Rocks Shell follow a vigorous process to keep trained. They go to several clinics a year sponsored by Tech-Net, a professional resource center for mechanics, where they learn about new techniques to fix the constantly updated systems on today's vehicles. They must be retested every 5 years to stay certified with the National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence. And the station is a certified state emissions testing center, so the technicians must know what they are doing.

Still, despite the changing technology of today's cars, most of his work is simple stuff. Oil changes are commonplace; he still recommends them every 3,000 miles even though manufacturers don't. His own 1998 S-10 pickup has 236,000 miles on it and he attributes its longevity to regular maintenance.

Interestingly, a good portion of his customers come to him for engine noises that have nothing to do with an engine problem. In the winter months when it gets cold, rodents and other creatures have a tendency to crawl into the engine areas looking for a warm place to nest. He recalls a woman who came in complaining of a rattling noise and a dog that wouldn't stop barking at her car.

"We opened up the hood and

out jumped a woodchuck," he said. "A few years ago we had a Honda with a nest of six little mice that were staring at us. They scampered everywhere and we were chasing them all over with a broom."

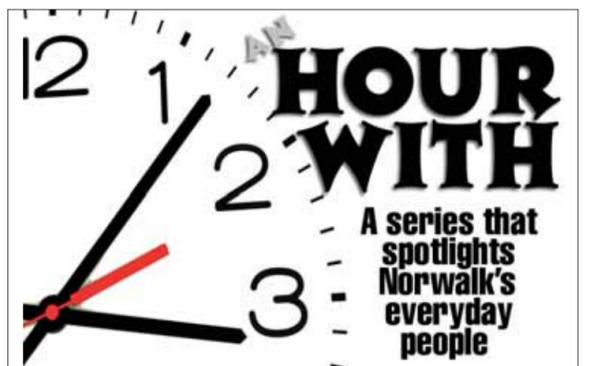
Layman has lived in Waterbury since 1986, but most people who know him consider him a lifetime Norwalker.

He married his wife Patricia in 1973, and they have two

children, a daughter Tricia, 34, and son Donald, 34.

When he's not working at the shop, he likes to garden and do maintenance around his home. He's known for taking an hour off from working on cars to go outside and work on the gardens outside West Rocks Shell.

"People ask me if I ever leave," he said. "I spend more time here than I do at home sometimes."



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