

People Talk: A conversation with Dick Wellenc



"When I sell you a bike, and if you're in trouble and need something done, we can do it. If you break down on the bike path, we'll come get you." — Dick Wellenc

Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

By Jane Kwiatkowski | News Staff Reporter
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Dick Wellenc grew up in North Tonawanda and attended Bryant & Stratton College before settling in as a salesman at the old Sears, Roebuck & Co. He worked 16 years for Sears in the automotive department, but he always kept his hands on bicycles. At age 15, Wellenc got his first job at a bike shop on Oliver Street in North Tonawanda.

Today he's 74 and operates Dick's Bicycle Shop on Niagara Street across from Isle View Park in Tonawanda. Wellenc says he has 600 bikes in his shop, plus one photo of his 1960 Thunderbird convertible that is displayed in his office.

On the local bike shop circuit, Wellenc is called the Grandfather of Bicycles.

People Talk: Tell me about your Thunderbird.

Dick Wellenc: I was 19 when I bought that car for \$3,000. I used to get stopped all the time by the cops. They would ask me if it was my father's.

PT: What about your first bike?

DW: My dad bought it for me, and it was used, and it was always broke so I always had to fix it. So I used to carry parts with me, and if I broke down I would fix it.

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PT: You probably can fix anything.

DW: Yeah, but I lost a little now because I'm 74. I'm not as good as I used to be.

PT: How fast can you fix a flat?

DW: Me? Five minutes if nothing goes wrong.

PT: Did you know from an early age you would make this your living?

DW: No. I worked at Sears first. I started 3/10/60. I worked in the garage mounting tires until one day the boss asked if I had a sport coat because I was starting on the floor. I went on the floor with six or seven guys who were a lot older than I was. You had to hustle – car parts, tires, batteries. They just threw me in. The first day I sold a motor for a '57 Plymouth. It was a \$500 deal. After I was there a year or so I got married and had four kids. I was there till '78. We bought a house in '65.

PT: Why did you leave Sears?

DW: They didn't want full-time help anymore. They used to treat their salesmen real nice – sick pay, profit sharing – but that all changed. I had a small bike shop in my garage at the time and worked nights in the shop and days at Sears. I had so much business I had tractor trailers coming into the neighborhood, and that wasn't good so I rented this little store for \$60 a month. One day at Sears my blood pressure went high, and I told my boss I quit.

PT: What have you learned about people through the years?

DW: They're different than they were in the '50s. They demand a lot of attention. They just are mad it seems all the time. You're going down the road, and if you're going too slow the guy is honking the horn at you.

PT: What is the key to your longevity as a businessman?

DW: Hard work. My day starts at 6 in the morning and I'm here till 8. It's kept me alive because actually I should be dead. I had stage-four cancer. That was in '05, and I'm still here. The guy upstairs figures I've got a lot of bikes to fix.

PT: I see you as the personality behind this business.

DW: I like to take care of people. When somebody comes into my store for a bike I don't just sell them a bike. I talk to them like we're talking. Do you want to go fast or slow? There's fat-tire bikes, race bikes. People think a bike's a bike. It's not. Is a car a car?

PT: You must have a loyal customer base.

DW: Yeah, but I don't put up with much. If someone gives me a hard time I don't want to wait on them. That's the way I am. They're in the wrong place. They'll want to come in and beat me up on price. I won't do it. But when I sell you a bike, and if you're in trouble and need something done, we can do it. If you break down on the bike path, we'll come get you.

PT: Is the popularity of bikes cyclical?

DW: Years ago in the '80s you sold bikes mainly for youngsters. Not too many adults would ride bikes. Teenage girls would buy 10-speed men's bikes. The little guys would buy BMX bikes. Now the market is more adult because doctors are telling people to ride bikes.

PT: Do you have a son in line to take the business over?

DW: I don't know. You don't make a lot of money in this business, but it's a good clean business. People who come in here are usually in a good mood.

PT: Do they make bikes like they used to?

DW: They make them better. Technology is awesome. When 10-speeds first came out they were clunky changing gears, but now they've fine-tuned everything. When you move the shifter, boom, it's right there. And the price of bicycles really hasn't gone up that much.

PT: Where are Raleigh bicycles made?

DW: Almost everything comes from China now – under Raleigh's strict supervision. Raleigh works with you. If we run into trouble financially because the weather won't let us sell bikes, they extend your terms. You don't see too many Schwinn in bike shops anymore because they sold their name to department stores. So when you go into WalMart or Target and you see a Schwinn bike, the only thing Schwinn about it is the name. It's not designed by Schwinn.

PT: Where do you see the future of bicycles?

DW: It's going to get better because people are living longer. I've got a guy who is 90 years old and he rides a bike. A lot of people are doing it to save gas, too. I had a lady who worked downtown, we put a rack on her bike for a laptop.

PT: There's nothing like the smell of a bike shop.

DW: You should see the basement where all the tires are. They have a distinctive odor. It's a nice smell. You know the best smell I've ever smelled? My old baseball card because they're worth so much money now. We used to put a clothespin and a baseball card on the spokes, you know, so it would sound like a motorcycle? You know what card I used to use? Mickey Mantle. Isn't that crazy? It's worth hundreds of dollars.

PT: What do you do for fun?

DW: Look at where we live. We've got the river. I've got a boat. We've got the casino. We've got the Riviera Theatre. Have you been there lately? Awesome. We've got Niagara Falls. I've got my Vette, my motorcycle. Why would I want to go to the airport and get strip-searched? They do it to old ladies in wheelchairs, for God's sake. No thank you.