

A Jewel of a Store

Dodson's Jewelers, a fixture on Riverside Avenue for 131 years, is one of Spokane's longest running family businesses. So when owner Penn Fix '68 announced it would be closing in early 2019, the news made the front page of the Spokesman-Review. But unlike many small stores that close their doors, Dodson's is going out on top.

"Last year we had our best year ever," says Penn, who runs the store with his wife Debra Schultz, "but it's time to retire, and we can control our own destiny."

Penn's great-grandfather George Dodson opened the store in 1887 in the Crescent Block now occupied by the Spokesman-Review building. After the fire of 1889, it moved to the Mohawk Building further east on Riverside and survived that building burning down in 1914. Then in 1987, Dodson's moved across the street to its current location. "We like to move about once every century."

And what has kept the store prospering this long? "Relationships are the most important thing," says Penn. "My wife and I have relationships with customers, vendors, and even designers that we've sought out in Italy and Germany. It's a very personal business and we are intentional about what we sell." His great-grandfather also made three trips to Europe before World War I; some of the design houses he visited (and sent postcards from) have the same locations today.

Dodson's remained relevant to its customers by sticking to the family's core values: service, quality of merchandise, good values, honesty, and treating everyone equally and with respect. They applied those same values to their employees, who today number 10 but in the past have totaled as many as 100.

"Starting in 1959, we opened six stores in four communities - Moscow, Coeur d'Alene, Tri-Cities, and Spokane," says Penn. But malls became too expensive, "so we focused on one store in 2000 where we can control expenses

and inventory a lot easier. And we've done more volume with this one store than five of the six stores combined."

When brother Barney Fix '71 left the business in 2008, Penn's wife Debra brought her expertise, and Saint George's connections, to Dodson's. She was one of the first student teachers at SGS, teaching science under Gert Douglas and Robin Crain in 1986 before starting her career in the local public schools. Penn and Debra were married at Saint George's, and eight members of the Fix family have attended the school.

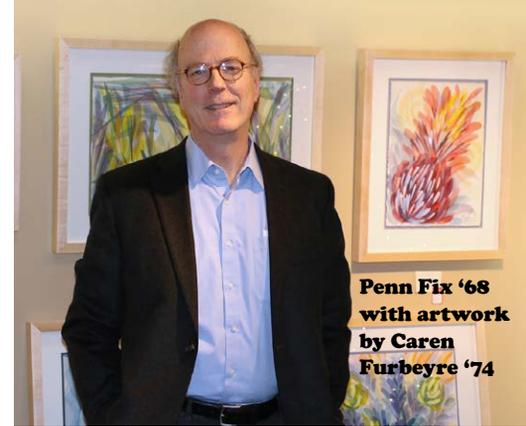
Penn himself was the first Athlete of the Year at SGS. "I did three sports - played baseball and ran cross country to stay in shape for basketball." His senior year the Dragon basketball team went 2-18, but Barney was on the first SGS team to reach the State B tournament, and Penn returned to help Gary Bumgardner coach the '74 team that finished 4th at State. "Customers would come for the tournament and stop in to shop and talk basketball," he remembers.

Art has been another continuing theme at Dodson's, since the founder displayed paintings for sale above the jewelry cases as early as 1889. In 2010, the store held its first show of artists and now boasts 3,500 square feet of walls on two levels. The last big show was in October for fellow SGS alumna Caren Furbeyre '74. "My wife and I grew up with art and Debra serves on the board of the MAC."

While the business is closing, Penn still owns the building and will stay busy. "I will do appraisals on estate jewelry, and I like to call contra dances," says Penn. "I'll also be organizing the papers for an alternative public school in Boston where I taught years ago."

"Our kids are okay with closing the store since both are earning Ph.D's in other fields. I guess you could say my children are too smart for retail work," Penn says with a smile.

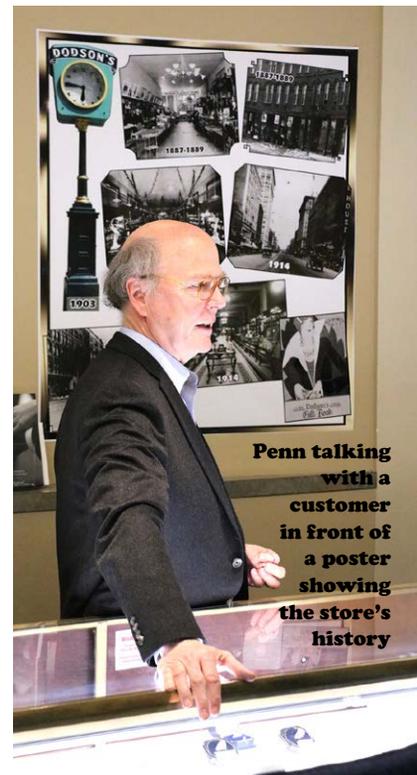
— John Carter, SGS Communications



Penn Fix '68 with artwork by Caren Furbeyre '74



Dodson's famous clock on Riverside



Penn talking with a customer in front of a poster showing the store's history

On the Web
 See photos from the Alumni Panel (opposite) and Caren Furbeyre's art show at Dodson's at www.sgs.org/magazine

