

Pete Latuff, Latuff Brothers Auto Body

Interviewed by Peter Myers at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul,
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Q Please introduce yourself.

A My name is Peter Latuff. I'm president of Latuff Brothers Auto Body in St. Paul. It was started in 1933 by John and Joe and later joined by Mike – they were all brothers. That was in 1933 and then in 1971, my cousin Mike and myself came into the business as our parents were getting older and we basically transitioned into the business. By about 1976 we were pretty much running the day-to-day operations and have ever since. And now my two sons are in there, and my wife.

Q What are your early memories of University Ave.?

A When I was a very, very small child I remember going down to the business and back then the cars were built considerably more sturdy than they are now; the fenders were very durable and they didn't have the materials that we have now. They didn't have bondo to straighten the dents and basically it was all done with lead. They'd just lead everything in, hammer the fenders out as smooth they could and then lead the surface, file it down and finish it off and there was no bondo used at all.

Q What do you remember about the street and the neighborhoods?

A I think back then the street...well there were a lot more dealerships on the Avenue at that point in time. You could buy any make of car, just about – they were pretty much all American brands at that time. You could go in and buy any car you wanted – on the Avenue was the place to go to get your car. And then the dealerships started opening up in the suburbs and they had bigger and shinier showrooms and they made it harder for the people in the inner city to compete and eventually they all kind of moved to the suburbs.

Q Talk about the annual ritual of going out in September with your Dad to look at the new cars.

A Oh, yeah. I remember that vividly. It was probably the highlight of my childhood. Every September the new models would roll out and there was a big fanfare – cars were brought in on transports with covers on them so people couldn't see the new model years and they'd have food and hors d'oeuvres and free pop for the kids. You got to look at all the new cars and it was a pretty exciting time. Especially when you're a young kid.

Q Aside from the car dealers going away, how else have you seen University Avenue change?

A I think in the early 70s there was a lot more...well there was a lot of liquor on the Avenue at that point in time, a lot of bars. I think that brought in some problems in itself to the neighborhood. The police have done a very good job of cleaning that up ever since. Then in the late 70s we had the Hmong community move in and that's been a

real plus for the Avenue. They've spent a lot of money, invested in the Avenue. Before they came in, the Avenue was very depressed. It was kind of in a down cycle. And they came and invested and opened businesses that really brought life back to the Avenue.

Q Talk about the role of University Avenue in the business life of the Twin Cities.

A Well, depending upon what part of University we're talking about – down towards the Capitol from basically Lexington to the Capitol it's a lot of family-owned small businesses and very...a lot of little restaurants, a lot of nail shops, beauty salons that type of thing, some mechanical shops, some body shops. As you move up the other side of Lexington going towards Minneapolis, you tend to see the more big box stores, the Target's and you migrate to the shopping centers. Then as you move down towards Prior you start to get into the small businesses again and some industrial areas. And as it gets into Minneapolis it's, again, small businesses.

Q Talk about your involvement in the small business advisory committee.

A The goal of the committee was to prepare people for the light rail that's coming and not to change the light rail, where it was going to run or anything like that. It was basically just to prepare people and get the word out about what they had to prepare for, you know, how many years of construction and how it was going to impact their businesses. With a lot of the businesses being small businesses, family-owned businesses on the Avenue, the loss of parking was a huge consideration and we found ourselves spending a lot of time on that. The fact that there's going to be more traffic going through the alleys on the blocks that have alleys, how deliveries are going to be made – those were the issues that were really critical. How semi's were going to be able to make turns on the Avenue, where employees were going to park – those were all huge considerations in how businesses were going to be able to survive that.

Q Do you think that the concerns about the light rail have encouraged businesses to talk to one another?

A I definitely think that's the case. Just within our own block we've...actually within about a three block zoning of our business – they're in the process of re-zoning it and it bought a lot of the businesses together and a lot of the businesses went down to the city and testified on how the zoning was going to impact them. The city listened pretty well, actually.

Q Do you have any other stories?

A University Avenue's...every day it's a different selection of people that are on the Avenue. You'll see everything from people dragging crosses down the Avenue to people riding bicycles on the sidewalk when they should be on the street, or you might have a homeless person in front of your building one day. You just never know what University Avenue is going to bring to you. Years ago they tried to have University Avenue Days, similar to Grand Avenue Days and they had bed races and stuff like that. That only lasted about a year, year and a half. It never really got off the ground.

Q Anything else?

A I think just the fact that it moves just a ton of cars and a lot of times University Avenue moves faster than 94 does. That's always been a real drawing point for people to come to University Avenue is because it had good transit abilities. I'm a little concerned with the light rail if that's still going to happen or not, but only time will tell. The engineers say it will. I don't think it will.

Q Do you have any notion as to why your Dad decided to set up shop there in the first place?

A My dad and my uncle were working at a body shop across the street and that's no longer there. And they were having a problem getting paid – it was the middle of the depression and they were having a problem getting paid so they thought, well we'll just open our own shop. So they went across the street and there was a building available and they rented it and then eventually bought it and then they bought the lot next to that and added on. We've been buying lots up and down the Avenue for quite a few years.

Q It seems to attract entrepreneurs, doesn't it?

A It's definitely a lot of little businesses start there and migrate to other parts of the community too.