

"Loving his work"

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When customers walk into T.O. Haas Tire on South Washington Street, they're greeted with smiles from most staff members. But if the customer's lucky, a special staff member will give them a greeting all his own -- a big, slobbery kiss.

Sam the dog has been an honorary employee of T.O. Haas for about two years. An unofficial greeter, Sam stands by the door and welcomes customers with a few friendly barks.

After barking to get customers' attention, Sam will almost always drop a small, plastic tire at the customers' feet.

The tire is Sam's prized possession at the shop. Sam spends most of his "work hours" at T.O. Haas getting customers to play fetch with it.

Store manager Tonya Fisher said many customers think Sam believes this is his "job."

Sam is a rescued dog, so Fisher is unsure of his exact breed, but she knows he's part Australian shepherd. She has read this breed of dog tends to think it has a job to do.

For Sam, that "job" seems to be entertaining customers with games of tire fetch. Like any good employee, Sam takes his job seriously.

"If you don't throw his tire, he'll let you know. That's the only time he barks. It's like he's telling you: 'You've got to throw it,'" Fisher said.

Sam showed up at T.O. Haas Tire a few years ago and seemed dead set on staying there.

On a particularly busy day, Sam showed up in the garage area of the shop. Fisher saw him, and for a brief second, thought she was imagining it.

But once Fisher was sure Sam was no illusion, she called the vet to ask about his tags. The vet knew exactly who Sam's owner was, a neighbor of the shop, who had rescued him.

The owner told Fisher she was looking to find Sam a permanent home. Sam, for his part, appeared to have someone in mind.

"He kept jumping the fence and he just kept showing up here," Fisher said.

Fisher took the hint. After she got permission from the owner, Sam visited her house.

"My little boys loved him, they fell in love with him," Fisher said.

Soon Sam and Fisher became "roommates" as well as coworkers. Fisher gives Sam a ride to T.O. Haas each morning. Sam is always anxious to get to work.

"He thinks he has to go to work every day. When we're off on Sundays, he lays at the front door. He thinks it's time to go to work," Fisher said.

The customers seem to be just as anxious to see him as he is to see them. Fisher said whenever Sam is gone, customers will ask for him. Other customers bring him treats and "tips."

"Parts people will bring him bones every day. People will give him a tip. They'll tell us to go buy him a snack or a chew toy," Fisher said.

Sam also has a customer to thank for his beloved tire. One day Sam brought a customer some valve stems to use for catch. The customer seemed to think Sam deserved better. He brought Sam the tire, a perfect toy for a tire shop dog.

"He brings his tire every day to work and he lays there. He's such a little celebrity," Fisher said.

And as far as employees go, Fisher is very happy with his performance.

"I think he helps people when they're waiting for their vehicle. He gives them something to do. He's very friendly and he does a good job," she said.

People can visit Sam and get their cars worked on during regular store hours from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and 7:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday. T.O. Haas is closed on Sunday.

The store, at 808 S. Washington St., opened in 2001. It offers services on tires, brakes, alignment, shocks, struts, batteries, air conditioners, transmissions, radiators, belts and hoses.

"We do everything here. A lot of people think we're just a tire store, but we're a full shop," Fisher said.

For more information on T.O. Haas, call (785) 238-2001 or visit www.tohaastire.com.