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Old Beetles lose a friend as Joe's VW closes up shop

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by [Charlotte Woolard](#)

Pacific Business News

The only car parked in the tiny lot in front of Joe's VW Repair that isn't a Volkswagen belongs to Jose Cabrera, owner of the shop and the driver of a Mazda sedan.

"I can't keep a good car," he said. "Every time I have a good one, they buy it off of me."

Inside the shop, in the middle of the piles of engines and tools and boat motors that define the cramped space, sits such a good car, a pristine 1968 Karmann Ghia convertible with a souped-up engine, a black and yellow hotrod with the flash and horsepower of seven years' labor from one of Hawaii's top VW mechanics.

The Karmann Ghia is just one more piece of machinery being sold off from Cabrera's inventory of cars, parts and tools as he closes the shop he's owned for 27 years at 871 Queen St. in Kakaako.

The landlord, Elroy Hamada, recently closed his nearby H. Hamada Store and plans to demolish the shop and home where Cabrera lives and works with his wife, Vicky. The space will be cleared for a parking lot.

The news that his lease would not be renewed ended a mechanic's career that started with a \$1.25



Tina Yuen, PBN

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per hour paycheck at Ala Moana Volkswagen in 1958, just about the time that the funny-looking imported cars from Germany were starting to catch on in America.

The work never made Cabrera rich -- the shop posted revenues between \$50,000 and \$65,000 a year -- but it did earn him a cult following of Volkswagen enthusiasts, people dedicated to keeping their Beetles and campers and Things on the road after even the manufacturer had given up making parts for their air-cooled engines.

Cabrera won't open a new shop. The ridge of a pacemaker protrudes from his chest, a remnant of a heart attack last year. At 76, he isn't up for a big move, he said: "Why keep pushing myself until I croak?"

Thumbing through the planners where he records his work, he ticks off stories of customers and the cars that brought them to his shop.

Dennis Suyeoka owns a 1971 Volkswagen camper with a 1970 engine that Cabrera installed. "When Joe's gone, I won't be able to afford Volkswagens anymore," he said.

Ruth Weiss' beige 1972 Volkswagen Beetle has never seen another mechanic. "He's like a big brother to me," she said.

And then there's John Park, who started bringing his red 1969 Beetle to the shop 15 years ago, drawn by the convenient location.

But Kakaako is changing.

The industrial neighborhood still is home to dozens of mechanics, body shops and garages specializing in everything from air conditioners to electrical work. But more leases are going unrenewed as landlords adjust to the creeping gentrification of the area.

"They don't want repair shops eventually," said Nancy Takane, who owns Kiyo's Transmission Service across the street from Joe's. "They want nice shopping centers."

Earlier this week, Elroy Hamada drove a forklift back and forth across the parking lot next door to Joe's, loading remnants of H. Hamada Store into a container for disposal. The shelves in the store are empty, and from the front of the store the copper and white towers of luxury condominiums

are visible above the roof line of auto shops like Kiyo's.

Hamada said he is leasing his store to Honolulu Orthopedic Supply and demolishing Joe's VW Repair to make room for more parking.

Cabrera closed his doors to new business last week, setting aside the time before the lease expiration at the end of June to prepare for the move and complete work on the project cars that fill the property.

"These are all money-making things that I have accumulated," Cabrera said, pointing out 10 engines and a stack of tires. "Somebody will want it. I'm not going to throw it away."

Calvin Glenn, a 25-year-old college student who has been learning the trade from Cabrera, worked under a tarp outside the shop Wednesday, rushing to refinish the car before the deadline.

In the house behind the shop, large plastic tubs waited for moving day. The pet pigeon, Boy, bowed at Cabrera from the top of a television set.

"There are enough Volkswagens to keep going," Cabrera said. "Anything that I take drives out of here. It won't go out on crutches."

He and Vicky plan to move to the Big Island, away from the tiny wedge of an office in the shop, the trays of miscellaneous engine parts and wrenches lined up by size on magnetic strips.

"After I get rid of this, there's no more," Cabrera said. "I mean, maybe I'll do ... I wouldn't mind a dune buggy. Take it down to the volcano."

The retirement might be a rough fit.

"Joe's worked all his life," Vicky Cabrera said. "You can't stop him."

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