

His mission: Clear local sidewalks

Craig Nickels
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p.5
(1 of 2)



Gazette Photo by Craig Nickels

Jeffrey Ferris was easy to find after a recent snowstorm blanketed the neighborhood.

By CRAIG NICKELS
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

When it's the slow season for bikes, Jeffrey Ferris shovels.

Ferris, 49, owns Ferris Wheels Bicycle Shop on South Street. During the winter, he runs a side business shoveling sidewalks for local businesses, churches and residents.

Ferris says he considers it "something of a public service" to clear sidewalks in the neighborhood. Most neighborhood sidewalks are too narrow for plows, he says, and keeping the sidewalks clear is beneficial for both businesses and residents.

Ferris, like many in Jamaica Plain, takes pride in the "Main Street" atmosphere of Centre and South streets. He also appreciates the densely populated area because it can support amenities like public transportation and groceries within walking distance. "Suburbs are like strip malls," he says.

another in 1982, Silverstein says she doesn't know how Ferris started shoveling for her. "He's always shoveled for us," she said.

Ferris started his shoveling business in "the mid-'80s" when the First Church in Jamaica Plain Unitarian Universalist asked him if any of his younger employees were interested in shoveling for them. When none of them took an interest in the job, Ferris rounded up a crew of locals, then began offering his shoveling

services to other businesses on Centre and South streets.

Depending on the storm, Ferris will gather a crew of up to 10 people, "mostly odd-jobbers and people with extra time in the winter," Ferris says. Ferris says he has about 40 clients, including a school, three churches, and a mix of condominiums and businesses. He and his crew travel from job to job on foot, and he tries to keep clients bunched together for efficiency.

After a blizzard, Ferris will try to clear a small path for each client on the first day, then go back on subsequent days to do a more thorough job. Depending on the amount of snow, Ferris may go back for up to five days to continue clearing snow.

Ferris charges about \$35 to \$40 per hour, but barter with a number of his clients for free food, haircuts, or storage space. Silverstein says that—in exchange for shoveling and odd handiwork—Ferris gets extra

handled shovels with a plastic blade. He eschews metal-tipped and aluminum shovels because the scraping is too loud, because they "wear funny," and because they scratch wooden steps. He also avoids ergonomic bent-handle shovels. He once tried to use a shovel that had a flexible PVC pipe for a handle, but he didn't like it.

Like other shovelers, Ferris encounters his share of obstacles. Bricks, metal plates, and exposed nails on wooden steps are all hazards that he encounters. "Just when you get a good rhythm going it's like—boom!"

Then there's the problem of snow falling off rooftops. According to Ferris, the Unitarian church has a series of roof angles that drop packed, melting snow in the middle of their walkways, which can turn shoveling into "a Sisyphusian task."

It's a small task for Ferris compared to a recent battle with cancer. Ferris calls himself "one year removed from two years of chemo."

Adams said that there were days a few years back when Ferris would "look like he should be home with a remote in his hand," but he'd still be out working.

Ferris—mentioning the illness only briefly—says, "I'm just glad there wasn't much snow in the winter of 2002."

Other activities

Ferris is a man of many interests and skills. He doesn't just shovel snow during the winter and trim vegetation in warmer weather. He holds classes on bicycle maintenance and runs field trips at Ferris Wheels. An amateur astronomer, he is the author of the Naked-Eye Astronomy column that appears frequently in the Time to Go Out section of the Gazette. He is also well known as a public transit advocate.

(next page)

(next page)

"He loves Jamaica Plain," says Paulo Adams, caretaker for the Loring-Greenough House and a Ferris client. According to Adams, Ferris also helps clear brush at the historic mansion during the summer months.

"He's got that old hippie communal ideal," says Joy Silverstein, owner of Fresh Hair and Ferris' landlord. Even though they started their businesses within a month of one

basement storage space for his business. Ferris also made a deal with the Eliot School exchanging free labor for use of their snow blower.

Despite the deal with the Eliot School, Ferris doesn't generally use snow blowers. "Shovels are inexpensive, light, quiet and a good workout," he says. He avoids back pain by switching hands, sides and angles.

"It's like dancing," he says.

He prefers straight, wood-

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(2 of 2)