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Sandiye Rae polishes a shoe as she walks in front of her tiny shop, interacting with passers-by in search of customers.

Sacramento woman puts 'heart and soul' into relocated shoeshine business

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The street outside of Sandiye Rae's SHOE SHINE window is clicking and clacking with foot traffic. Standing on the sidewalk, Rae looks down at the scurrying Cole Haan loafers and Nine West boots and Jimmy Choo pumps, all dusted with urban grime.

"Hi guys!" Rae trills to a trio of men in nearly identical dark suits and black oxfords as they rush past her tiny shop, tucked into a corner of the Sutter Club Garage along downtown L Street. "Ready for a shine?" They shake their heads. Not today. Too busy.

Rae sighs.

So many shoes. So few customers.

It was not always this way.

For more than 25 years, Rae had a captive audience inside Sacramento International Airport. Pass through the security line inside Terminal A, and there she was: Sandiye Rae, the bubbly shoeshine lady, in her funky hats and colorful clothes.

Rae was an institution at the airport, an independent operator who made more than a decent living buffing the footwear and lifting the spirits of a constant stream of travelers, from weary coach-class vacationers to pampered celebrities.

She shined legendary boxer Mike Tyson's shoes "before he bit anyone's ear," she says. She polished actor Matthew McConaughey's cowboy boots, and newscaster Mike Wallace's oxfords. Bluesman Ray Charles came through one time. So did actress Brett Butler. Rae pocketed \$7.50 for each shine, plus the occasional eye-popping tip.

Then the fancy new airport terminal got built, and the shoeshine contract went to a large company, Goodfellows. Rae and four fellow independent shoe shiners could have worked for Goodfellows, but would have had to turn over all

but their tips to the company, she says.

"I couldn't do that," Rae says. "Some people don't tip at all!

"It became apparent I would have to leave." So did the other four shiners.

And so, a few months ago, Rae ended up here, inside the L Street entrance of the Sutter Parking Garage between Eighth and Ninth streets, hustling business, doing some creative marketing, and barely eking out a living.

Customer finds new shop by chance

Rae is a bright burst of color in an otherwise drab stretch of downtown. Each morning, she places a shoe that she has bolted to a red platform on the street corners that flank her shop, with an arrow pointing toward it. At the garage entrance, pinwheels and balloons announce her presence.

Yet, unless she takes to the street in her black hat and red lipstick, cheerfully approaching strangers and passing out her business cards, most people hardly seem to notice.

If only she could get some of them to come inside, she says, she could reel in customers who would surely come back again and again.

Daniel Pone is one of those. For years, he sought Rae out at the airport, making sure he gave himself enough time to get his shoes shined before his flights departed. Then, suddenly, she was gone.

One day, on his way to the state Capitol, Pone stumbled upon Rae's new shop. The two greeted each other like old friends.

"She's got the sunniest disposition, and she does a really good job," Pone says. "I'm happy that I can get my shoes shined down the street now, and I'm telling everyone I know about her. It's sad that she is struggling so hard now to let people know she exists."

Rae works alone, out of an oblong office not much bigger than a jail cell. One window looks out to the street, the other to the garage's parking attendant.

Rae has done her best to spiff up the space, decorating it with a string of white lights, a ceramic boot, a small bowl filled with peppermints. Soft jazz drowns out the thrusts of car engines, and on the wall above the wooden shining chair a sign reads: "We Don't Believe in Miracles. We Rely On Them."

Rae is looking for a miracle. Some days, despite her best efforts, she gets zero customers. On her best day at her new gig, she shined 14 pairs of shoes.

It is becoming a struggle, she says, to pay her \$829 monthly health insurance bill.

But Rae is nothing if not an optimist. With hard work and a good attitude, she says, she is certain that business will come.

She insists she is not bitter about having to leave the airport. The job afforded a good living for a woman raising a child on her own, she said. She made lifelong friends. She had a blast. She has not seen the new terminal, she said, but hears it is beautiful.

"I'm very grateful for all my time there," she says, fighting tears. "I feel like I grew up there, and it was a great place to grow up. The airport was a blessing for me. But I had to move on."

Shoes are cleaned, then polished

Rae is coy about her age but said she has a son, James, who is 30 years old.

"I used to pray that I could stay with that job until he was 18," she says. "So I got more than I asked for."

Shining shoes, Rae says, has never been her passion. "It's just a vehicle for me to listen and learn and help people have a better day," she says. "That's what I'm all about."

Yet Rae is enthusiastic and meticulous about her craft.

After choosing the perfect polish from her huge collection, she dons black latex gloves and applies a soapy cleaning fluid to each shoe. She dries them, then grabs a clean cloth and rubs her polish in a slow, circular motion. She touches

up tips and sides with a toothbrush. She applies several coats of color, then takes a soft brush in each hand and gently buffs back and forth in horizontal strokes. That is when she turns her wide eyes on her customer, telling her story, asking questions, offering opinions. When the conversation flows, the buffing can go on for 15 minutes or more.

But Rae's client base has changed dramatically since her glory days at the airport.

At her downtown location, most customers don't bother climbing up the steep wooden steps to her polishing chair, and if they do they often are too busy chatting on their smartphones or scrolling through their email to carry meaningful conversations. Most drop off their shoes and pick them up after a lunch date at the private Sutter Club, or during a break from work. They are almost too busy for hello and goodbye.

Rae misses the camaraderie with her co-workers at the airport, and the leisurely discussions she had with travelers looking to kill time while waiting to board their planes.

"We had a great team, and we did a great job," she says. "But this is where I am now, and I'm gonna put my heart and soul into it."

To that end, Rae has launched a website, www.ilovemyshoeshine.com, a Facebook page and a "mobile shoeshine" service. She has distributed hundreds of business cards.

"I think I'm comin' on," she says with a smile one afternoon, working on the shoes of her fourth customer of the day. "Heck, if they build that sports arena, I could be a zillionaire in a few years!"

But for now, she is just a new kid on the block, trying to find her footing.

Rae picks up her brushes and begins buffing.

"I'm just a girl trying to make a living," she says.

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