

This monthly article highlights one of our branch members. We hope that you enjoy knowing a little more about your fellow members and the interesting life they have had. If you have someone you would like to nominate or if you would like to help author an article, please email the editor, Ron Nakamoto, at ron.nakamoto(at)yahoo.com.

## James (Jim) Davis



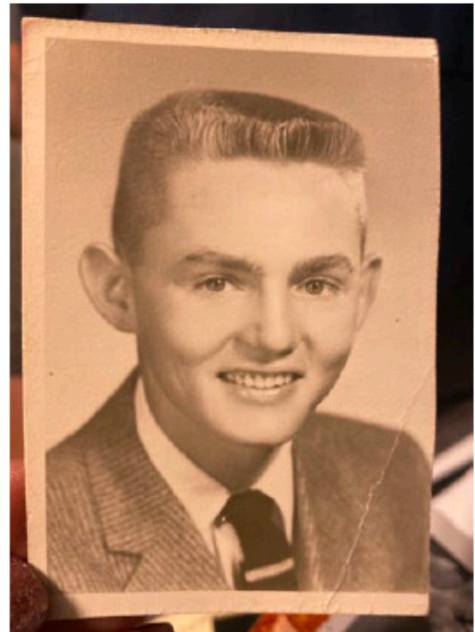
*Editor's Note: Did you know that small businesses make up 99.8% of employers and 64% of net new private-sector jobs? Many of our members have carved their careers with large companies, blazing trails in technology, producing needed products and services and doing it with large teams of workers. But, for generations, workers were more likely to be employed with a small business with fewer than 100 people. This month we recognize a fellow member who was one of those small business owners who possessed the entrepreneurial spirit and sheer guts to risk everything to start a small business that employed people and helped power the U.S. economy.*

On 14 November 2018, the following article was published in the Los Altos Town Crier. "*Old-fashioned automotive shop revs into 36th year*" - A

photo taken in front of the "Jim Davis Automotive" shop had Jim with his arms around his principal mechanics, BJ Correia and Brian Nakai. An excerpt from the article starts out with: "A well-loved auto shop that services cars for customers all over the South Bay, including residents of Los Altos and Mountain View, hosted a celebration Nov 8, 2018 for the man behind the muscle, Jim Davis. "I really try to accommodate the businesses here," Davis said of his Barron Park neighborhood." To mark his 36th anniversary, Davis priced gas for the day at \$3.60 per gallon (price matching his anniversary). I'm waiting to see if anyone notices, he said" Later, he said "Nobody noticed my great idea." So much for Jim's sense of humor.

Jim was born at home in Urbana, Illinois. He was the youngest of four kids. "My parents were tenant farmers that lived working the land. We had a roof over our heads but at that time, no indoor plumbing, electricity or phone ... but we did have a great outhouse. All the kids went to a rural, one room school with a potbelly stove for heat and of course, no indoor plumbing. I remember contracting rheumatic fever three times, at nine, twelve and fourteen, and each time I was bedridden for three months which is probably why I like to be out and about all the time. (*Editor's note: Rheumatic fever, along with Polio, was common in the 1950's and was not fully controlled until the widespread use of Penicillin and antibiotics.*) During those periods, one of the few outlets I had to the

outside world was listening to the radio and trying to catch any baseball game on the air. I developed a passion for baseball and became quite the expert for each of the teams, their players, and each player's individual statistics. Of course, my favorite team was the New York Yankees with Yogi Berra and Mickey Mantle. Once I was on my feet, I stayed very active playing on the Unity High School baseball, track and basketball teams, lettering in each one. On the basketball team I was a six-foot guard when we took the State Conference and came within one game of making it to the State Championship. (Our team had a twelve-point lead in the fourth quarter but wasn't able to put it away.) I thrived in math and did well academically, graduated with the third highest GPA in our class.



*Crew cut Jim in high school*

"After high school, I enrolled at the University of Illinois and majored in aerospace engineering. (Can you imagine me as an aerospace engineer with a slide rule on my belt? I could not either, so after a year I transferred to Illinois State University and pursued a teaching degree as I enjoyed working with our youth. That pursuit became moot when I was drafted. After boot camp I was assigned to the First Calvary Division as a radio operator/forward observer at Fort Benning, Georgia. *(Editor's note: The 1st Calvary Division, or "First Team" is famous for its distinctive triangular patch with a slash and a horse's head which you've seen Robert Duvall wear on his uniform in the opening sequence of "Apocalypse Now". The unit is unique as originally constituted as a horseback calvary, evolving over time to its present composition as a Combined-Arms (unit equipped with assault and troop carrier helicopters as the "horses" for rapid maneuverability freeing the infantry from the tyranny of the land.)* As luck would have it, just prior to the unit deploying to Vietnam, I received my ETS (expiration-term of service) so the entire division left for Vietnam except for a few of us who were left behind to process out of the military.

"As a single guy I spent the next few years discovering and enjoying life which I term "my wild years". A group of us would on a whim decide to take off to Chicago or to New Orleans to enjoy the Mardi Gras by chartering a private airplane and deciding where to stay only after we partied all night. Al Hirt and Louie Armstrong were doing their thing in small clubs on Bourbon St. during that time. Pre- and post-party years, I worked at a gas station and became a part- owner of the station at a time when the gas station owner purchased and had to run a second station. This early exposure to running a business was invaluable experience for me albeit for only a short time.

"After that experience, I took a one-month vacation to California in 1969 and took the opportunity to reconnect with a young lady named Mary Jo, who I met in high school in Illinois and was now living in the area. While there I decided to call and visit. We hit it off and enjoyed each other's company until I returned to Illinois. We kept in contact by

phone which at that time was considered long distance so paying the bill took a chunk out of my paycheck, but then again, you know about young love. Our long-distance relationship was great, but I wanted to see her, so I flew out with tickets to attend the play "Hair" in San Francisco. I had a well-planned date night only ruined when the cast decided to protest the Vietnam war by shutting down the show. What a bust, but I secured an "A" for effort and we later married. We started our life together with her working at the Wall Street Journal while I attended DeAnza Junior College and later San Jose State College on the GI bill. I majored in Computer Science, enjoyed it and was doing well but as is common with young couples, money or more appropriately the lack of it became a real challenge with a wife and a child on the way. I put school on the back burner and took a job as mechanic at Matador Shell gas station in Palo Alto.

"I had learned all things about cars early on in my life starting with part-time jobs at service stations changing tires, checking oil and other fluids on a car. I developed my mechanical expertise by watching and working with "Pappi" an old mechanic that was a wiz at diagnosing and fixing cars but didn't like dealing with people. I became the "go-between" with the back and forth between customer and mechanic and soon was able to discern problems on my own. I learned everything through good old fashion "hands on" learning.

"For the next ten years I became quite experienced with the various types of car mechanical and electrical problems, pricing, inventory management and most importantly customer service and employee management. My troubleshooting skills always followed the scientific method of deductive reasoning (probably based on my math skills). But the most important lessons I learned, all evolved around people relationships. The customers are always looking for good work at a fair price. Employees cared about respect and being able to earn a fair wage with benefits to support their families. While these seem to be common sense principles, I was always amazed at how few practiced those principles.

"In 1982, an opportunity arose to buy a business in Palo Alto's Barron Park district. My kids were six and twelve at the time and my wife was a full-time mother so we had no safety net but that is why they call it "an opportunity". Of course, I didn't have the money for the down payment, but I had some very good customers/friends that offered to loan me the funds I needed, all with a simple handshake. I didn't even have sufficient cash on hand to handle the first day's cashflow needs. But in spite of the obstacles, I was absolutely convinced that this was the right decision and I made it work."

Through luck and much hard work, the "Jim Davis Automotive Service Station" business became successful and grew quickly with its word-of-mouth reputation for good work, fair pricing, and excellent customer service. Jim's business approach and differentiator simple stated was: "Most owners of service stations were mechanics. I wanted to be a business manager who owned a business."

"As a small business owner, I would regularly support various local initiatives and causes and gladly did so as I could see the benefit of their efforts in my community. I coached little league baseball and served as a Board Director for over ten years. For

several years, I volunteered to coach a habitual "underachieving team" and managed the kids to win their senior division. I always believed and preached that a win in my book was defined by the 110% effort on the field.

"As the business grew and was running well, I was able to pursue other activities, joined SIR, played more golf started travelling, and had to endure a knee replacement with an extensive rehab period. I officially retired in 2019 and now spend my time gardening and golfing. I enjoy experimenting with grafting and transplanting various plants. I practice the trial and error method of gardening which I first picked up from my father when he worked for the University of Illinois in the horticulture department. Growing rose bushes from cuttings is my current passion." Jim concludes his story with the following comments to his fellow SIR members. "I am awed by the accomplishments of my fellow Sirs and feel privileged to be a fellow member. I grew up on a farm with nothing and believed at the time that this must be how it is. I say with deep pride that America gave me the opportunity to better myself and I was fortunate enough and worked hard enough to improve my lot in life, for myself and my loved ones. I think and hope that someday everyone in this great country of ours believes that they have an equal chance of improving their lot in life for themselves and their loved ones."



*Jim and Mary Jo on a cruise to somewhere.  
Jim forgot where but a great photo to  
capture the moment.*