

Denise Smith Amos Of The Post-Dispatch

Perhaps it is Bennie Vales-Ammons' long, red-painted fingernails, her signature spotless outfits, or her stylish hats and jewelry that fool you into believing she can't possibly own Lace-N-Armor Automotive Repair, a small but growing fix-it shop in the Wells-Goodfellow neighborhood.

After all, it was she who painted its building a tasteful teal and beige, she who furnished its waiting area with the kinds of comfortable chairs and leather sofa you'd expect to find in some people's formal living rooms and she who put flowered wallpaper in both immaculate public restrooms.

Even the long garage, where four mechanics handle up to seven cars at a time, is swept and painted teal and gray. There are few visible oil stains on the floor or carelessly placed tools, but that could be because Lace-N-Armor is only a month old.

Vales-Ammons and partner, Regina Harvey, started the shop at 3400 Goodfellow Boulevard with the idea of employing mostly women and catering to female car owners. But business has picked up faster than Vales-Ammons and Harvey could hire still-rare women mechanics, so many of the shop's customers and half its mechanics are men.

"We're having a true problem finding women," Vales-Ammons said. "Oh, they're out there. I've talked with (auto repair) schools that have graduated women and they say they're either already working as mechanics or they're . . . sitting behind a desk because no man would hire them as mechanics."

Vales-Ammons is quick to confess that she knows little about cars, having spent most of the past 25 years as a pharmacy technician. It is Harvey, co-owner of West End Towing, who knows her way around under the hood. Harvey was out of town last week and unavailable for comment.

"I don't do anything in the shop," Vales-Ammons said. "I Windex the windows and make the coffee. It's hard for me, switching from being an employee to being an employer. I still have employee habits." Six months ago, the two women and a (male) silent partner pooled about \$15,000 in savings to start the company, which employs 13 people, including a few family members.

Getting the company going was a struggle, Vales-Ammons said. Any new repair shop struggles for credibility and word-of-mouth advertising, she said, but a woman-owned shop faces additional barriers. "I've heard women say, 'I wouldn't let a woman work on my car,'" Vales-Ammons said. "That hurts . . . especially coming from a black woman, because we've always had to do it (work) to survive." Despite such misgivings, Vales-Ammons said she believes the time is right for her kind of business. More women are working outside the home and making the decisions about car care.

"I've always had negative feelings when I went to (male) mechanics about work I was having done on my car," Vales-Ammons said. "I didn't like the way they'd talk to me. The feeling I'd have when I left was, 'He probably thinks I'm stupid.'" "One such experience - when three different repair shops failed to figure out what was wrong with her car - got her thinking about going into the business herself. Getting the problem fixed required several

visits to a dealer, where she spent a substantial sum to fix several minor problems before a mechanic finally surmised that the car needed a relatively cheap fuse replaced.

"Whenever I'd talk to a woman about cars, we'd all pretty much have the same story," she said. She knew Harvey had been a mechanic for five years. Together the two determined to give auto repair a feminine touch - hence the name Lace-N-Armor, to denote strength, preparedness and grace, she said.

Garage workers wear white lab jackets to pick up cars and drive them into the garage. They use plastic and beach towels to prevent tracking dirt into car interiors.

"We try to keep things neat and clean as we can; I'm kind of picky about that," said Vales-Ammons, a 48-year-old grandmother who, when raising five children, developed the habit of rising at dawn to clean house before going to work.

"I'm not prissy; I think I'm normal," she said.

The partners expect to become profitable in 18 months or so, Vales-Ammons said.

They face daunting odds. The small shop competes against larger franchise operations, which usually have a much larger advertising budget, she said.

Often, Lace-N-Armor has trouble competing for preventive auto maintenance because the nationals are running discounts. "But I believe people will pay more for people they can trust," Vales-Ammons said. To counter the discounts, the shop keeps tight controls on costs. Vales-Ammons, who has spent her life stretching a dollar as a wife and mother, says she has done some of the same things in business. The shop buys used furniture and leases its equipment.

That doesn't mean it's scrimping on employees, she said. Lace-N-Armor is evaluating health plans for them, and may pay three-quarters of the insurance premiums.

Red tape has been one of the shop's more difficult problems.

Vales-Ammons wants to put up a teal awning displaying the company name in white lettering. But city inspectors have erected several barriers to it out of concern that it would clash with the half-industrial, half-residential neighborhood.

If anything, the awning would be a sedate addition, Vales-Ammons said. Behind her building is a car-wash painted electric blue. The shop's other neighbor is an industrial company with a faded sign and littered parking lot. And across the street is a large business with dozens of mammoth sewer pipes lining its expansive lot.

Except for a nearby apartment house, Lace-N-Armor is the only business with any kind of landscaping. Nevertheless, Vales-Ammons said, a building inspector told her to plant a couple of trees and repaint her freshly painted, silver cyclone fence black. She said she'll comply to get the awning installed.

"I'm not a quitter," she said. "My friends will tell you, I stick with it to the last inch, until everything around me says it's not going to work."

That, she added, also describes her partner's entrepreneurial ethic.

"As far as I know, there's not another female shop around here, so we have to do well," she said.