



Car Talk on Magazine Street

By Roger A. Stetter



Alejandro (Alex) Vargas

If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.

—Tom Magliozzi, NPR's *Car Talk*

Like my favorite public-radio mechanics, the Magliozzi brothers, my auto body shop man on Magazine Street, Alex Vargas, and I talk about everything — from human behavior to love, money and politics.

About 15 years ago, I saw a “For Sale” sign in the rear window of a light blue 1983 Mercedes Benz and bought it on the spot for \$2,500. All I needed was an honest body shop that wouldn't charge an arm and a leg to fix it up. That's how I found Alex Vargas.

A short, sturdy man with a sunny smile and easy-going disposition, Alex grew up on a cattle ranch in Peru and immigrated to the United States when he was 28 years old. His first job, working at an auto body repair shop in Florida, paid \$40 a week. Ten years later, he purchased a vacant lot on Magazine Street in New Orleans and opened a body shop that is now a thriving business. Working side by side with his son, Alex can make any car look as good as new, often coming up with ingenious solutions and working with tools and equipment that he put together himself.

Fixing damage inflicted on my own cars over the years, Alex has become a trusted friend. His superlative workmanship is exceeded only by his infectious sense of humor and folk wisdom. I often drop by his shop just to say hello, pet his prized Pomeranian and drink a cup of coffee. On one recent visit, a man drove up in a white panel truck, wearing a work shirt, sunglasses and a baseball cap. As he stepped out of the cab, I asked, “Aren't you Deacon John?” “Yes,” he laughingly replied, “I'm traveling *inconegro!*” I never know who I will meet at Alex's shop — a rhythm and blues musician, a young woman in distress, an Uptown banker — but he or she is bound to be interesting and friendly, relieved to know that Alex will take care of everything and it won't be necessary to raid the retirement account to pay for the car repairs.

Alex and I come from very different backgrounds so we don't always agree on politics. I play the 17th-century Spanish literary character Don Quixote, the protagonist of the novel by Miguel de Cervantes, who hopes to bring a sense of beauty and purpose to the world but who often fails because he is unable to see the world as it truly is. Alex is my loyal friend, Sancho Panza, a wise and simple man who learns from the world around him and lives happily with things as they are, rather than as they should be. He says, “America is the best country in the world! If you work, you can have anything you want.” His point is well taken and I can only wish there were more people like him. Alex is the quintessential self-made man who lifted himself from a low-paid worker to a successful entrepreneur and a credit to our country and work ethic.

“Where else,” I ask myself, “can I have such interesting car talk?” Luckily for me, Alex has no plans to retire and our friendship will endure even after my driving days are over. Instead of turning on the radio and listening to the Magliozzi brothers, I need only visit Vargas Body Shop on Magazine Street.

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