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Jimz Fix-It Shop

How James Kocmoud learned to fix things by doing

By **Colin Gregory-Moores, EA Contributing Writer**

James Kocmoud has always been fascinated with fixing things. As a nine-year-old walking through alleyways to school, he would salvage whatever treasures he could find – or, as he says, “stuff to fix” in the little workshop of his parents’ basement in Illinois. Back in 1962, he called it Jims Fix-It Shop. Little could he know that fixing things would be his life and that 45 years later he would relaunch the brand in Florida. “I’ve tried different things, but I always end up going back to fixing stuff,” he says.

The school of life

The third of four children, Jim was born in Chicago in 1953. His father owned a small machine shop downtown, and his mother was a homemaker. He credits his fierce independent streak to his no-nonsense upbringing – “I certainly needed disciplining often” – and his industriousness to the Midwest work ethic, born, as he says, of the cold weather and harsh environment. Reflectively, he adds, “And you know, adversity makes you stronger.”

Growing up, he had a paper route, shoveled snow, weeded gardens, stocked drug-store shelves, and briefly washed dishes at a greasy spoon. In his parents’ basement, he would experiment, fixing all sorts of stuff. He grins, “Working on electrical items, I got shocked plenty, let me tell you.” Neighbors were fascinated that he could fix anything. Occasionally, after botching a repair, he’d have to get a real repairman involved, but it was, as he says, a great learning experience.

Raised in the very structured and disciplined environment of the 1950s and early 1960s, he vividly remembers starting Lyons Township High School, encountering hippies, flyers being passed around, and Vietnam War protests. It was just as surreal as the Moon landing. In 1971, he received a draft number and decided, rather than be drafted, to enlist in the Navy. And so, his dad took him downtown for a physical. They rejected him because of flat feet and bad eyes. “Back then I regretted not being in the service. It would’ve made me more worldly, which is what I desperately needed at that age. But, you know, life will teach you what your parents didn’t.”

Straight after high school, he moved out, found an apartment, and worked at a Standard Oil station pumping gas and checking cars. Some things he



Jim Kocmoud performs high-potential testing of a generator winding.

learned on his own, other things from the people around him. Admittedly, he acquired a few bad habits too. “Later in life, I’d think back and say, ‘I sure wish I hadn’t’ve done that.’ But you learn from mistakes, and I made plenty of them, so I must be a genius,” he laughs. Eventually, he got tired of the job and passing out Green Stamps and started Home Auto Repair. He put leaflets out under wiper blades and went to customers’ houses to work on their cars – a novelty back then.

The Sunshine State

At one point, Jim’s girlfriend got weary of the Chicago weather and relocated to the Sunshine State. After a visit, he packed everything he could into his ’65 Skylark and headed south too. He immediately found work at a lawnmower repair business, earning the then king’s ransom of \$3.50 per hour. Later he moved to Gulf Breeze Nursery to repair its equipment and manage its lawn mower division. After a few years, the owners sold him the business. He bought their inventory and started Gulf Breeze Service Center. Besides garden equipment, he and his employees worked on cars and boats and trailered boats for northerners. It was a heady time; especially, seeing his name on a billboard. Unfortunately, not knowing sound business practices like P&L and CODB, he later had to close shop.

One Christmas in the mid-1980s, he and his wife bought a Radio Shack Color Computer for their kids. Jim was instantly hooked. He taught him-

self BASIC and, thanks to the generosity of an older friend, started the Lemon Bay Bulletin Board Service. Before long, he became part of a nationwide testbed for U.S. Robotics HST 9600 modem. "Learning computers back then, it was DOS only, pre-Windows, and, in retrospect, a much simpler time," he recalls. He launched CCR - Computer Consulting & Repair, focusing on on-site consulting, backups, and custom menu creation. Locally, he became known as the "lawn mower repair guy who now fixes computers." "It was just one of those things; you felt the earth shift a little bit, and you think, 'This is something I maybe should be doing.'"

Chicago and — finally! — financial success

In the 1990s, Jim relocated back to the Chicago area with his family to help his father computerize his machine-shop business. He worked briefly in the corporate world as a Novell network technician, but he chafed under wearing a shirt and tie and having a boss. During a business slowdown, he got laid off. He found work as a boat mechanic at Marina City marina for three years while building up KMR Technical Services, which he launched around 1995. "I worked with a marketing guy who made me sound just 'big enough' to be legitimate, even though in the beginning it was just me."

At first, KMR's only business was repairing computer monitors, which at that time were relatively expensive to replace. His knowledge grew with the technology, as he saw the monitor industry mature from monochrome to CGA, EGA, VGA, and then to SVGA. Chicago Computer Guide asked him to write a monthly column. Unfortunately, growth in monitor repair waned in the late 1990s, and Jim was forced to downsize from KMR's 8000-square-foot building to a 2000-square-foot storefront.

He resolved to close KMR if it couldn't be profitable. Through the National Electronics Service Dealers Association, whose members shared repair and business information via CompuServe, he started paying closer attention to the financial side. Alongside monitors, KMR had also begun repairing computers and printers. The business soon became both busy and lucrative. In 2007, after several years of growth, he sold it.

Jimz Fix-It Shop

Jim and his wife moved to Edgewater, Fla., and bought a big place. Ever the fix-it guy, he relaunched Jimz Fix-It Shop – with a "z" to make the name more memorable. As his advertising slogan goes, "If you plug it in, we fix it." Now as then, the shop sees an amazing array of electrical items for repair, including monitors, TVs, lamps, outdoor LED signs, stereo and tape decks, electric motors, and generators. Jim especially enjoys



Jim Kocmoud at the age of nine in his parents' basement working at Jimz Fix-It Shop. As an adult, he began using "Jimz" to make his company's name more distinctive.

getting something in that he's never seen before, using troubleshooting techniques honed from years of figuring it out. He still repairs the CRT monitors used in Heidelberg's Polar paper cutters, which he has been refurbishing since the mid-1990s. During hurricane season, most of the shop's business – an authorized DuroMax service center – involves generator repair. As sole proprietor, Jim proudly embraces being "the head cook and bottlewasher," even if it limits growth. However, perhaps that is not such a bad thing as he turns 73.

Up front, he always asks customers what the replacement value of the repair item is. If it's anywhere near the diagnostic fee, he urges them to replace rather than repair. Once an item has been evaluated – and sometimes repaired for no additional charge – the customer receives an honest estimate of parts and labor. Repairs come with a standard 90-day warranty. He says that two developments have impacted the repair business: Post-Boomer generations repair things less, and many products are now built to meet price points rather than longevity.

When looking back at that nine-year-old boy – skinning his knuckles and getting shocked while fixing things in his parents' basement – Jim feels a bit sorry for kids today living life vicariously through their phones. Learning to fix things by doing has been his making. **EA**

— Photos courtesy James Kocmoud



Jim at one of Jimz Fix-It Shop's electronic repair benches.