

ST. PAUL



PHOTOS BY JOHN AUTEY — PIONEER PRESS

Technician Anthony Wang watches as Charlie the cat prowls the repair bays at Turbo Tim's Anything Automotive on University Ave. in St. Paul on Tuesday. Six cats make their home at Turbo Tim's St. Paul location, which opened in June, and four at their shop in Northeast Minneapolis.

Cats and motors both purr at Turbo Tim's

The shop cats are a fun diversion, unless you're more of a dog person

By Ellie Roth » eroth@pioneerpress.com

Most people don't naturally think of cats when they think of auto shops. Or vice versa.

But when customers walk through the door of Turbo Tim's Anything Automotive in St. Paul, the first greeting is not usually directed at the friendly staff, but toward the cats sleeping on the couches and cat beds or stretched across the front desk.

Yes, Turbo Tim's has done the seemingly unthinkable — they've combined their love of kitties with their knack for the automotive. The shop has become a hit in the community.

"I saw there were cats, and the reviews were good," said Hamline University student Olivia Nesgoda, 18, who stopped in to Turbo Tim's to get her car fixed before driving home to Grand Marais, Minn. the following weekend. "But the cats piqued my interest."

In the world of auto, Turbo Tim's sticks out like a rainbow-colored sore thumb: The lobby of their St. Paul Midway location is brightly lit by the floor-to-ceiling windows, each garage door is painted a different color, and a giant cat tree is nestled in the corner, usually with a cat or two



Charlie the cat is held by Tim Suggs, co-owner of Turbo Tim's Anything Automotive in St. Paul, on Tuesday.

basking in the sunlight.

It all started with Bobby. About 10 years ago, Rachel Grewell said she got a call from her co-owner husband Tim Suggs who said he had picked up a stray cat and planned to give her a permanent home at their shop.

"I was like, 'Terrible idea! This is bad. How will this work?'" Grewell said. "And then she came into the shop and everyone fell in love with her and all the mechanics got all softy sweeties with the cat. Like — all the customers were excited to see her and I was like 'Okay, this works.'"

Soon everyone knew there was a cat at Turbo
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— Rachel Grewell, on her concerns when her co-owner husband planned to give a stray cat a permanent home in their shop

Cats

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Tim's. And one cat quickly grew to many. Customers who were no longer able to take care of their cats brought them to live at Turbo Tim's. Charlie, a large, cuddly Bengal cat, was a stray that an employee found. Stan, a regular at the shop, frequently shows up with cats needing a permanent home.

"The cats just come when they're meant to be here," Grewell said.

Today, there are six kitties roaming around Turbo Tim's St. Paul location, which opened in June, and four in Northeast Minneapolis.

Customer-friendly, too

"The shops feel like a very welcoming environment for a variety of people," Grewell said. "We really want it to feel that way and that they feel comfortable. They can talk to anyone and ask any questions they have."

The cats are often stress relievers for customers and help create an atmosphere of gentleness around the shop.

"If you have to wait for your car and you're stressed out, having a cat in your lap just makes it a little easier," Grewell said.

In addition to automotive services, Turbo Tim's participates in many community outreach services and projects, such as women's workshops where women in the community are able to learn more about their cars and become more involved with the automotive industry. They have put on automotive workshops with the YWCA program, Girls Inc., as well as local Girl Scout troops.

"You just never know what people are going to want to learn," Grewell said. They teach women how to check tire pressure, how to change their brakes, and practice starting a car and filling gas with some of the younger groups of girls.

Other humanitarian projects include a partnership with the Lift Garage, a nonprofit aimed to move people out of poverty and homelessness by providing low-cost car services, and highway clean-ups. They partner with community members to host events in their space, from puppet shows to Art-a-Whirl.

"It was pretty early on where we were like, we have this space. We have resources. It's available," Grewell said. "We like to have fun, people need space to have events.



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Cat brothers Patrick, left, and Abe, play in the lobby at Turbo Tim's Anything Automotive on University Ave. in St. Paul Tuesday, Oct. 25, 2022. The brothers and their sister, Sara, not pictured, had just returned from a trip to the veterinarian.



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Cats at Turbo Tim's Anything Automotive in St. Paul enjoy an afternoon snooze in the sunlight on Sept. 29, 2022. The auto repair shop's St. Paul location is home to six cats.

Let's do this."

In March, Grewell and Suggs were named Humanitarian of the Year at the VISION HiTech Training & Expo out of thousands of attendees.

Connect with customers

Kevin McGrath, Turbo Tim's marketing director, says he's no expert on cars. He started working at Turbo Tim's as the janitor. Being an outsider in the automotive industry has allowed him to connect with customers because he "thinks

the way the customers think."

"I've just really tried to focus on really honing what we do," said McGrath. "If we weren't doing these other things the cats would come across as a gimmick, maybe. By the fact that people see that they can trust us and we listen and that we're active in the community, not just here putting out our business... now we're here in Midway and that's important to bring the same thing to a new neighborhood."

Like the building itself, Turbo



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Cat-themed bumper stickers are available for customers at Turbo Tim's Anything Automotive on University Ave. in St. Paul on Tuesday, Oct. 25, 2022.

Tim's website (turbotims.com) is brightly colored, and filled with kitties. McGrath even created fun bios to add to the website alongside a list of services the shop offers.

In turn for creating an inclusive community at Turbo Tim's, customers also give back and add to the shop. Customers bring in cat toys and treats. Overnight security camera footage often reveals people stopping by to say hi to the cats, or even shoving treats under their door. Someone who picks up scrap metal from the shop constructed the cat logo from sheet metal for Grewell, McGrath and the gang to hang inside their shop.

"We'd like to let people have

kind of the agency and freedom to feel like they can kind of add to what we're doing here," Grewell said.

At the heart of it all, the people of Turbo Tim's created a business offering high quality services where workers and customers can march to the beat of their own drum.

"We're really just doing what we enjoy. There's a lot of joy in our work. There's a lot of humor in our work. And there's a lot of creativity," Grewell said. "I have strongly felt like incorporating the arts and humor in the work that we do just makes it a better work environment."