



For 9 Nights, His Body Shop Is a Temple

Prayer Offered Up In New Garage

By Val Cavalheri

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A colorful and elaborate altar, chanting devotees and burning incense are hardly what you'd expect to encounter at an auto body garage, but that's exactly what greeted visitors last week at a body shop just west of Dulles International Airport.

D&V Autobody, located for the past 22 years in Chantilly, is moving to an address on Overland Drive off Old Ox Road, and nothing is being left to chance.

Dave Maharaj, the "D" of D&V (the "V" is his wife, Vena), moved to the United States in 1971 from Trinidad and Tobago, bringing with him all the culture of his heritage. When his business outgrew its location, he knew he had a lot for which to be thankful.

Turning the bay area of the newly constructed garage into a Hindu temple, he invited some friends and brought in a priest from his native country to observe pooja (prayer) over nine evenings. Since the ceremonies started April 16, 40 to 100 people have stopped by each evening to wish the family luck and admire the ornate temple that Maharaj built in honor of Nau Durga, the female spirit responsible for homes and construction.

It took Maharaj a week to complete the altar.

"I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, but I am creative and prayed for inspiration," he said.

The altar includes statues of the goddess Durga sitting against an elaborately carved wall. Another wall is covered with nine images of the goddess, signifying the nine aspects meditated upon during the nine-day festival.

On a recent evening, the service brought out about 60 supporters, most dressed in colorful Hindu attire. Some sat at the altar, playing musical instruments and singing. Maharaj and his wife joined the priest in paying homage to the goddess, offering food and flower petals and sprinkling holy water.

"When I came to America in 1971, I had the equivalent of a third- or fourth-grade education, but I came with big dreams," Maharaj said.

Living at the YMCA in the District for four months and taking on any job he could find,

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Dave and Vena Maharaj pray in D&V's new garage. After 22 years in Chantilly, the firm is moving to Overland Drive off Old Ox Road. (Photo by Val Cavalheri -- Loudounextra.com)

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Maharaj turned to something he knew: cars. He returned to Trinidad and Tobago two years later, met Vena and brought her back to the United States. They have been married for 34 years.

"She has always been so smart," he said. With his skill and her acumen, the couple opened their auto body repair business.

D&V continues to be family-owned, with sons Ron and Kevin running the shop while Vena and daughter Jenna take care of the administrative end.

And Maharaj? "Dad chooses to continue to be a technician and work with cars," Kevin said.

On Wednesday, D&V Autobody will open at the new location. The statues, the pictures and the altar will be taken down. The smell of incense will give way to the smell of paint.

Asked if all of these offerings and prayers are meant to guarantee his success, Maharaj shakes his head.

"I'm not looking for benefits," he said. "I just want to give thanks for everything that I have received. I have so much."

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