

Launched by a friendly job counselor he still remembers, lensmaker finds the perfect fit for a lifelong trade

Description

default watermark

When Jose Minor was 16, his Mexican-born parents sent him from his hometown of Richmond, California, to Mexico, where he had never been.

It was 1969. They were worried he was getting into trouble at home,â?• he said. â??So, they sent me and my younger brother to Grandpa to get straightened out.â?•

Minor has four siblings, three brothers and one sister, and his parents didnâ??t have a lot of time to supervise teenagers in the tumultuous Bay Area of the â??60s. His father was a sheet metal worker, his mom a cook. â??My whole life she cooked at Gonzales Mexican Restaurant in Richmond,â?• Minor said.



Jose Minor has been making eyeglass lenses for 50 years, nearly 20 of them in San Francisco at the office of Drs. Bruce and David Stamper. (Photo by Naomi Marcus)

His grandfather was a retired general in the Mexican Army who had fought with Pancho Villa and later *against* Villa. â??He was tough!â?• Minor chuckles, â??and it worked.â?•

His grandfather taught him to play chess and told him stories of his adventures. â??I loved my grandpa,â?• he said, â??and we stayed a year.â?• Since then, itâ??s his grandfather who has traveled to visit the Minor family.

His grandfather advised him to enlist in the U.S. military when he returned home, but Minor knew the Vietnam war was raging and hell no, he wasnâ??t enlisting. He was lucky he got a good number in the draft lottery.

Starting early

Slim and small in stature with a thick head of grey hair, Minor carries himself with a straight, almost military posture. His crisp white lab coat fits him like a glove, and in his upper breast pocket, he carries a ruler, (sometimes two), a polishing cloth, and a miniature screwdriver.

Minor has been making eyeglasses for 50 years, the last nearly 20 in San Francisco, at the Mission Street office of Drs. Bruce and David Stamper.



Minor checking a new pair of glasses with a customer. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

He rises at 4:30 a.m., drives from his Vallejo home to the El Cerrito Bart Station to get the 6:15 train, and gets into the office before 8:00 a.m. â??I like to get in early, have my coffee and eat something,

prepare for the day, before I start working.â?•

He returned to Richmond in time to graduate from Harry Ells High School. In 1972, he got a job with BART, which had just opened that September. But he didnâ??t like it. They had him in the train control operations center, a vast room deep underground. â??Noise and lights flashing all the time,â?• he frowned at the memory.

He lasted a year and quit. He went to the Unemployment Office in Richmond. â??I was 21, and the job counselor, a young woman, said, â??Well, would you like to make glasses? We have paid training.â??â?•

The job is technically known as ophthalmic laboratory technician, one of many trade programs offered through the recently approved federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act.

He shakes his head as he tells the story, every detail still clear, how that day set the course of a lifelong trade. After 50 years, he still remembers the counselorâ??s name: Molly.

default watermark

She was pretty and a suitor of hers was looking for someone to work in his optical office. â??She told me to go down there, use her name, mention the on-the-job paid training, and I would get hired.â?• Grinning, he adds, â??He must have been sweet on her cause he hired me immediately.â?•

He was paid $2.25 an hour during a two-year course in grinding and shaping lenses. He started out surfacing them, the most rudimentary task, but he took to it. â??I liked it because I was good at it. I can cut glass with precision and polish it to perfection.â?•

â??Magic handsâ??

His first job was at American Optical in San Leandro, which bumped him up to $7.75 an hour. He got married and started a family. It turned out he was really good at shaping eyeglasses, at the craft of grinding and curving glass into lenses.

â??I could always cut the lenses to fit the prescription, I knew instinctively when to stop grinding the glass. I just knew how far to go,â?• he said. â??All the doctors Iâ??ve worked for say I have magic hands.â?•



Minor with all the tools of his profession. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

In the 1970s and â??80s, he worked for Site for Sore Eyes and Lenscrafters at Richmondâ??s Hilltop Mall, earning $8 an hour. â??I saved them a lot of money because I could salvage damaged lenses. Also, I learned how to make bifocals out of plastic.â?•

Eventually, he went to work for a private doctor in Rodeo, where he stayed for many years. â??I worked a lot, even Saturdays. I didnâ??t have to, but I did. I kept getting better and better.â?•

He had a son, born in 1979, and a daughter, born in 1984, becoming part of a large extended family as his brothers, who went into the carpet laying trade, all began raising kids as well.

He divorced in the late â??80s and remarried in 2000. He and Elvira, a retired seamstress, bought a home in Vallejo. He took that year off â?? the only one he ever did â?? to care for his mother when she was diagnosed with cancer. His father died in 1984. He took his mother to all her appointments and treatments.

Minor is philosophical about her eventual death. â??She died at a normal old age, she was proud of me and her other children.â?•

Tragedy strikes

But his ordered world blew apart when, a few days after 9-11, on Sept. 16, 2001, his 27-year-old son, Jose Jr. (Joey) was shot and killed at a party at his own home in El Sobrante. He left four children and a widow.

Minor doesnâ??t like to talk about this time, except to say he took a few months off from work to attend the trial of his sonâ??s killer. Every day. The killer was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 11 years.

He didnâ??t feel justice was served by the verdict, but he found solace and oblivion as he practiced his craft. â??My work requires concentration and that helped me. Temporarily.â?•

Eventually, it seemed a good idea to leave the East Bay. He had been working for a private doctor in El Sobrante and wanted a fresh start.

A friend in the optical business told him about an opening at the office of Dr. Bruce Stamper, a long-established private practice in San Francisco. â??I met Dr. Stamper for lunch, it wasnâ??t even a real interview, more of a conversation, and he hired me immediately.â?•

default watermark

That was almost 18 years ago, and he has since developed his own clientele. And, he now makes $25 an hour. He makes the glasses there at the office; they are not sent out as they are by many optometrists.

â??I get the prescription, create the finished eyeglasses, ensure they come out right, then I fit them, then I make all the adjustments. Customers like that I take a lot of time to get their lenses right.â?•



Minor in 2002 with his son Joeyâ??s oldest daughter, Victoria, one of his eight grandchildren. (Photo courtesy of Jose Minor)

Besides work, his passion is fishing, especially at Pt. Pinole on San Pablo Bay. He has eight grandkids â?? four from his daughter who lives in Fairfield, and four from Joey â?? and loves attending the younger oneâ??s baseball games.

At 70, he thinks about retiring, but not this year. Not next year. â??My hands are still steady, but I do get more tired by the second half of the day.â?? He pauses and looks around his workbench.

â??The customers are so appreciative, and itâ??s just a great place to work. Itâ??s still worth getting up at 4:30 in the morning.â?•

Said Dr. David Stamper: â??He has an enormous patient fan club spanning decades who not only adore his white lab coat and genuine warm smile but trust no hands more with their glasses.â?•

Category

1. All Posts

default watermark

Date Created
18/05/2023
Author
naomi-marcus