



JOHN DISTAD

John Distad called his wife Sandy one Friday night and said he was in Crystal City changing a tire for a customer and would be home late. She wasn't surprised. John, she knows, has become part of the Capitol Hill family. "For John to say no to any one of you would be like telling me or my girls that he doesn't have time to help when we need him."

As his customers know, this is typical Distad behavior. Since 1959, the Distad family has practiced car repair the way doctors used to practice medicine. They are always on call.

In an era when fewer children go into the family business, the Distads bucked the trend. Four of Harold Distad's eight children are carrying on the business their father started.

John took charge of the service station at 9th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue after his father's death, but it's a family affair. His sister, Donna Cranford, does the bookkeeping; his brother, Roy, runs the Anacostia auto shop, and another brother, Richard, runs the diagnostic shop at 14th Street and Maryland Avenue NE. "Roy is the workhorse, Rick is the technician and I'm just in the middle," John says. Another sister owns gas stations in Marlow Heights and Odenton, MD.

After Harold Distad died, his wife Helen came to work every day, made coffee and did some bookkeeping. Seven years ago, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, but still lives in her Mitchellville home. That's possible because her eight children take care of her 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "That's our day of rest," John says of the time they each spend with their mother.

John's connection to Capitol Hill began with his birth at Providence Hospital, then in the neighborhood. He grew up in Mitchellville, Md. He and Sandy have been married for 34 years, live in Gambrils, Md., have two grown daughters, two grandchildren and one on the way.

"Family," John says, "always comes first." However, the principle is sometimes hard to practice, he says, given the hours he and his siblings work.

"That is just the way he is," his wife says. "He can't just walk out the door and... go home when someone needs their car to go on a trip. His whole family is the same. "They are always there for each other and anyone else who needs them."

Sometimes people need John for things that have nothing to do with cars. He once got a call from a customer asking him to recommend a plumber in the neighborhood. Another customer who was downtown getting her tags called to ask him what ward she lived in.

John says he and his family are in a dying trade. "We're one of the last ones left," he says of full-service gas stations. But he has no complaints. "We've had a lot of fun," he says. "We enjoy what we do and we enjoy helping people."