

# Business born out of love of 'Indians'

BY TIM MORGETROYD  
The Acton Tanner

One day three months ago, 39-year-old Ralph Digirolamo did what many people wish they could do after a hard day's work. He came home and told his wife: "I just can't do this anymore."

"What do you want to do?" she asked him.

"I just want to build motorcycles," Ralph admitted.

Then he did what many people only dream of doing: began to earn a living from a hobby.

"All he ever wanted to do was work on bikes, and I said to him you have to be happy in this life. It's too short," recalls wife Kim.

Married in November, the newlyweds faced another big turning point: launching a business. Their son Lee, 8, and daughter Jennie, 6, love the bikes, "but not the way we do," she says. Home is a Georgetown farm, but since opening "we spend every waking moment in Acton," says Kim, adding that Ralph often works from 8:30 am to 1:30 am the next day.

"I feel really excited and nervous. Overwhelmed a little bit," says Ralph now that 'Flathead Indian Motorcycle Shop' has been open one month.

Shelves are crammed with vintage Indian parts worth their weight in gold: the last Indian left the factory 40 years ago. Parts are sandblasted, reshaped, chromed or painted and re-drilled so the bikes rolling out of the rented garage across from Leathertown Lumber seem to be rolling off the legendary 1901 to 1953 assembly line.

"There's a lot of love, but a lot of heartaches, put into these," sighs Ralph, staring at the row of vintage Indians — "the Cadillac of Motorcycles" — he's now working on. Often he builds parts from scratch.

"He's so modest, I had to sort of kick him in the pants to open the shop and charge money to do it," recalls Kim, adding she was never so happy as when Ralph gave up being a steeplejack. "He was a

gizillion feet off the ground walking on beams and you kind of wait for someone to show up at the door with the bad news. It was hard on the nerves."

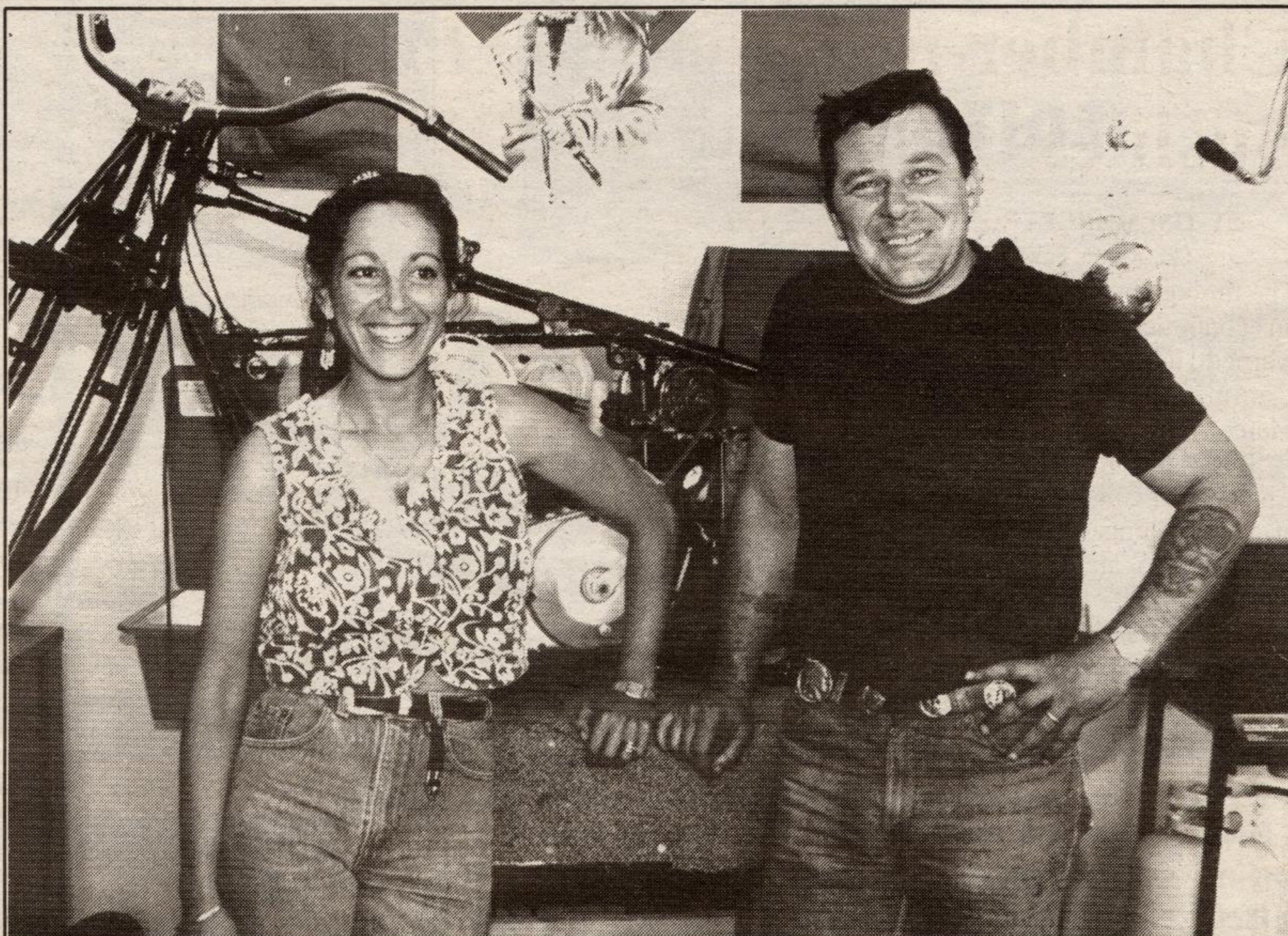
Ironically, balancing on beams hundreds of feet above Toronto was safer than straddling a motorbike — Ralph had a safety harness. On bikes he has wiped out on the QEW and been in a coma 10 days, after a tractor trailer ran over him and his bike in 1977.

He can laugh about nearly losing his life but not about losing bikes in his collection. Four of his nine Indians were sold during a cash crunch, for \$14,000. One resold for \$25,000. "There were only 50 models made of one of those four — and that's as far as we'll go with that story."

Ralph now travels less, as he once went all over North America to fix the bikes. "Now people come to him," reports Kim.

A network of friends help locate parts, but the couple will search barns for bikes forgotten there. "We've gotten bikes that have been under water 20 years and Ralph has restored them. That's why I call it an art: you need the patience of a Saint."

Once you couldn't give these bikes away, says Ralph — today's price range is \$20,000 to \$50,000. His first Indian (bought 23 years ago for \$1,000) can fetch \$23,000 today. "I was 16 and going to buy a Jeep, but ended up buying the motorcycle. Mom and Dad were not happy," he grins.



WORKING ON A DREAM: Kimberly and Ralph Digirolamo. (Tim Morgetroyd photo)

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