

Mr. Ice Cream

By Rob Cummings

Jose Badillo sits outside the Kool Man garage on Grand Street in Brooklyn, eating a ham sandwich and drinking a diet Pepsi on a Friday morning. Between bites, Badillo stares at the sky. It's one of those hot summer days when Manhattan looks as still and as flat as painted backdrop through a hazy scrim of damp air.

For the last 17 years, Badillo has sold ice cream from a truck that is housed in this Brooklyn garage. Today, it looks like rain.

"When it's raining it, don't pay to go outside," Badillo says. Badillo, 58, has brown eyes and a brown mustache that is starting to go gray. On his right forearm is a tattoo that shows a mermaid embracing a stone cross engraved with the words, "Rock of Ages," a souvenir from years spent with the merchant marines. He takes a look at the sky, then he shrugs and goes inside to get his truck ready for the day's run.

Like other Kool Man trucks, Badillo's is white with tropical aquamarine trim. The words Kool Man are written on the sides in big red letters.

Badillo keeps a wooden golf driver and an old saber standing up in a rack welded to the dash.

Above the windshield is a machete in a case with his name on it. "The machete's just for decoration," Badillo explains.

In the back is a generator that powers two compressors for the refrigeration units and a small boiler. Once the day's supplies are loaded — 10 gallons of sweetened cream, five of vanilla and five of chocolate — Badillo is ready to roll.

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But lately the transmission has been slipping. It won't stay in third gear. Most of Badillo's route can be done in second, he says. Except the bridge. The Williamsburg Bridge is a problem. Badillo makes the long climb to center span in second gear and then shifts to fourth to coast down the Manhattan side.

Once, on his way back to Brooklyn, two guys in a car were honking at him, impatient that he was moving so slowly, Badillo recalls. As the car pulled past his truck, one of the men raised a pistol and fired a shot into the van near the open driver's side door. "They were aiming for the tires," Badillo said.

Badillo came to America from Puerto Rico when he was 19. He married his wife here and raised six children. One day in 1977, Badillo walked across the street to buy an ice cream cone. He got to talking with the guy in the truck and decided to buy the 1960 Ford and the route that went with it.



Jose Badillo: 17 years on the ice-cream trail.

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Back then it cost him \$7,000. Today a new truck would be about \$50,000.

Badillo, who lives in the Bronx, attributes the longevity of his truck to short routes, good maintenance and being parked in a garage from late October to early April.

"The trucks are like bears, they sleep in the winter," he said.

The corner of Madison and Clinton Streets on the Lower East Side is the first stop. Badillo parks the truck near a sidewalk fruit vendor in the shade of some tall sycamore trees, and cuts the engine. The salsa music that had been playing on the radio becomes audible again.

Badillo leans back in his seat and surveys the scene. Lots of people coming and going, but no customers yet. He reaches up into a metal box about the size of a pack of cigarettes and flicks a switch. This is the source of the signature sound broadcast by ice cream trucks all over the city — a little metal box manufactured by Nichols Electronics in Minnesota with an on-

off switch, a volume control and four tune settings. "Pop Goes the Weasel" is tune No. 4.

A young woman appears at the window and asks for a cherry ice. 12:45 p.m.: The first sale of the day.

Two other customers appear in quick succession asking for vanilla cones with sprinkles. The cones are \$1 each; the sprinkles are free.

Some of his competitors charge \$1.50 for the cones and extra for the sprinkles, Badillo says. He prefers to keep the prices down and the volume high.

"I charge \$2 for a big milkshake. Other guys have it for \$2.50," he says. "But it's OK. I make a living."

Making a living is a little tougher these days. On an average day, Badillo can take in \$350. Out of that, \$100 goes to supplies, \$20 goes for gas, and about \$40 to the guy who helps him sell on his route.

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When Michael, his helper, shows up, Badillo starts the engine and drives to the next spot, two blocks away.

There are 10 regular stops on this route. Most days Badillo goes around the route before heading for the garage at about 9 p.m. Other drivers will stay out until 11:30, pulling into the garage just before closing time at midnight.

Some years ago Badillo drove his route just as late. The route used to be much bigger, Michael says.

"I gave a part of my route to a friend," Badillo explains, "because he didn't have a place to go."

And these days the circuit seems long enough. In a few years, Badillo would like to sell his truck and retire. He looks out the windshield at an invisible point in the distance. "Seventeen years is a long time," he says.

Rob Cummings is a free-lance writer.