

# Engineer finds key to success as locksmith

By Patricia Bathurst  
SPECIAL FOR THE ABG

A series of jobs that left Robert Vallelunga downsized, merged or bought out by a rival company convinced him that there had to be a better way to make a living.

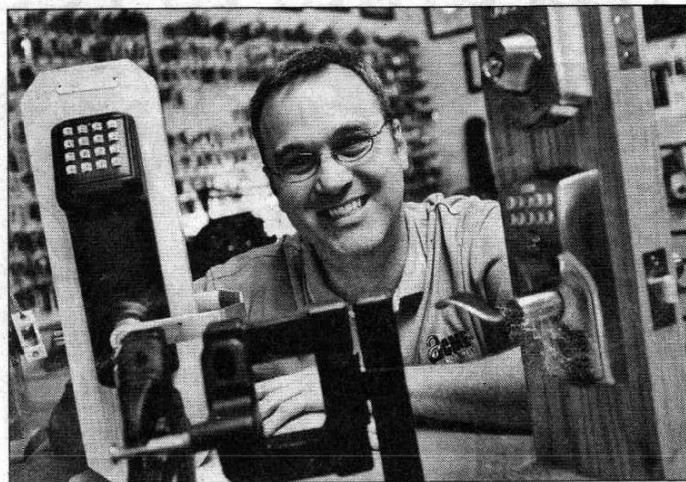
So about a year ago, he and his family moved to Mesa, his hometown, where he bought Acme Locksmith.

"I'm an engineer — I love to tinker," Vallelunga said.

Not only has he learned how to pick a lock, but he also has discovered that locks today represent both antique and wildly new technology. There are keys and locks based on techniques known for hundreds (sometimes thousands) of years and, increasingly, locks keyed with electronic codes.

Vallelunga's professional background in software engineering, combined with his innate tinkering skills allows him to "bridge the gap between mechanical and electronic locks."

He's convinced that soon electronic keys will be the norm.



MICHAEL CHOW/ARIZONA BUSINESS GAZETTE

Robert Vallelunga is learning that running a small business involves things such as communicating effectively with your team.

"Even for residential keys," he said, electronic codes make locks more secure yet easier to change."

While Acme locksmiths repair and replace more than 500 locks around the Valley every month, Vallelunga's also seeing another part of his business expand rapidly: Home-safe sales are up — way up.

"One safe manufacturing

company reported that its sales were up by more than 50 percent this year," Vallelunga said, "and ours are up by more than that."

Acme is selling dozens of safes a month, especially models that offer security and fire protection.

"These are both residential and commercial type safes, designed to keep both cash and

## Acme Locksmith Inc.

2735 E. Main St., Mesa  
480-380-2263  
www.acmelocksinc.com

**Employees:** Seven certified locksmiths, two staff assistants and owner Robert Vallelunga.

**Stats:** "You should never pay more than \$65 to \$70 for an emergency (residential) repair during regular business hours," Vallelunga said.

**Quote:** "The previous owner kept great records, and we have a skilled, talented team. We need to differentiate ourselves, and create customers for life," Vallelunga said.

**Fact:** Locksmith fraud is relatively common, especially with Internet advertising. Use only locksmiths who are members of Associated Locksmith of America, a professional locksmith association with the highest standards for members.

valuables," he said.

It's a small shift in business

that demonstrated to Vallelunga an aspect of owning and managing a small business that he appreciates. "I've worked in larger companies," he said, "and larger companies can't respond quickly to changes in the market. Small businesses can be nimble — we've been able to adjust to shifts in the market quickly, moving from primarily commercial work to more residential."

Acme has seven fully certified locksmiths, each with a fully equipped service van.

In the past year, Vallelunga's had an opportunity to learn nuances of management he'd not known before, especially that "managing a business is a full-time job. You have to be a little driven to be an engineer in the first place, but this is different."

He's learned the importance of continuous communication with his team, so that "everyone knows all the elements of the business. Some have come to see that 'if the company succeeds, I'll succeed.'"

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