

15 MINUTES

Keeping up with the Times

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At JoS. A. Bank, a retail men's clothing store in the Bell Tower Mall in South Fort Myers, store manager James Galante's hands grabbed a stack of khaki pants, looking for the right one for a pre-holiday shopper.

"We have dark green, we have blue, we have it all," he told the customer in a calm, understated tone. He found the desired pair, and walked briskly, with great posture, to the dressing rooms as the customer, a middle-aged man in business attire, trailed him. A long, yellow measuring tape hung around Galante's neck.

"He's an interesting guy," said sales executive Jack Degnan, who also has good posture, not to mention very round, expressive blue eyes. "(Galante) is from Brooklyn."

Degnan himself is an interesting guy — nurtured in New Haven, Conn., schooled in Philadelphia in the early 1960s, strongly interested in the liberal arts, and a history major.

"Because history is the story of America," Degnan said. "And the story of life. And it's fascinating to read about."

He sold newspapers in college. Those were the now-defunct Philadelphia Bulletin, The Philadelphia Inquirer, and The New York Times, where he later worked in sales and marketing.

By the time he graduated from college in 1964, he already had the job at the Times. He started with them the

next day and stayed for 31 years.

He started in the paper's schools and college division, a special section aimed at educational needs as one of 18 sales representatives. Three years later, he was manager of the department.

At that time, he lived in Ridgewood, N.J., about 15 miles northwest of Manhattan, right across the Hudson River. Degnan and two others were part of a marketing team that traveled across the country.

"What we did was we divided up the country," he said. "I went right across the Midwest...and all three of us met in California."

Besides the newspaper itself, Degnan sold the "Student Weekly," a special Times publication for students and teachers, which included current event filmstrips, and other educational products. He was on the road a lot.

"This time was difficult because my family was in New York," he said. And, for three years, they all decided to live in Chicago. "We loved Chicago, Chicago's a great city."

One of Degnan's sons is now a hip-hop disc jockey in Florida on 105.5 The Beat, named Scrap Jackson; another son is running a language school in Miami; one daughter is a pharmaceutical rep in Florida; another daughter is a medical rep in Long Island. Degnan's wife is a nurse. He's been married for 42 years, and is "proud of it." Most of his family lives in Connecticut and New York, and he goes back a couple of times a year.

"But this is the time to be in Florida,"



PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Jack Degnan

he said. "You're not going to find a better day than this Friday. What a gorgeous day!"

In the 1970s, he helped bring top New York Times correspondents to meetings with teachers in high schools and colleges across the country, in a program called "Keeping Up with the Times." The reporters would basically go on tour, he said.

"If it was an architecture writer, he'd talk about architecture; if he was a theater critic, he'd talk about theater,"

Degnan said. "It was fun for me, bringing the guys out there — James Reston, Harrison Salisbury, Tom Wicker."

Wicker was the New York Times correspondent in Dallas when John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Degnan still reads four newspapers a day, he said: The New York Times, USA Today, The News-Press, and The New York Post.

"Being a New Yorker, I like the New York Post for its sports and its Page 6...all the gossip," he said. "I would get the Boston Globe if I could get it...I'm a big Red Sox fan...still celebrating the World Series."

He goes to four or five games every spring when the Red Sox come to the City of Palms Park in Fort Myers for spring training, he said, and sometimes follows them over to Fort Lauderdale.

Degnan said he likes the fact that you can hold a newspaper in your hand, leave it on your kitchen table and go back to articles later on. Television media is no substitute, he said.

"You have to spend time reading and examining, you know, with a critical eye, what's happening in the world," he said. "Also, the report in a newspaper is usually fuller. If you watch the 6:30 p.m. news — which I do every night — Couric or Williams can only give 22 out of those 30 minutes to news. So at best, they can give you a headline."

Later in his career, in the 1980s, Degnan lived with his family in Lakeland and was head of New York Times marketing in the Southeast. He helped the paper grow, from 20,000 to 50,000 copies in that area, he said. ■

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