

## BUSINESS PROFILE

# Sue's helps Southwest Florida workers with cuts, dings, and scrapes

BY EVAN WILLIAMS  
ewilliams@florida-weekly.com

Sue's Safety Supplies, Inc. operates out of a tiny office connected to a garage off an industrial stretch of Metro Parkway. But it serves all of Southwest Florida with its first aid supplies and safety equipment, with a four member staff that includes owner, and karate black-belt, Sue Paul.

"We've kept our overhead low, which is good these days," Paul said.

She founded the business in 1994 in a cottage by Captiva Bridge, while living on Sanibel Island. A neighbor had asked for her help walking the dog, she said. But the dog ended up refusing to be walked, the owner's son had to come walk it. The son was a visionary character, Paul said, lots of ideas, but sometimes with a lack of motivation to follow through. She ended up working for the son's own safety supply business, and later purchased it from him. After she moved to an apartment in South Fort Myers, she took Sue's Safety along with her, and moved the business out of her apartment because she wanted a personal life.

"It's more of a laid back life now," she said.

Paul grew up outside of Philadelphia. "That was awesome," she said. "But I love living here, too. I had a great childhood. We lived on a nice street. Times were good then. It was kind of a whole-

some environment."

She learned a lot about business from her father, who took the family from a rough inner city neighborhood in Philadelphia where they ate dinner on a wooden board set across sawhorses to a more comfortable life in the suburbs.

"He felt to be successful in business you have to stay really small and tight, or get really big," Paul said. "Our goal is not to be the biggest first aid distributor, but, with all modesty, to be the best."

After Paul graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Health and Physical Education from Gettysburg College, her father stopped helping her financially, she said.

"But what I did get is, he's always been available by phone to help out with business decisions."

And in Fort Myers, she found a community that was willing to support her struggling business, as she got it up and running in the mid and late 1990s.

"Sam Galloway and other community people provided me with groceries," she said. "There's a lot of loyalty here. It would be hard for me to move."

While Paul no longer practices karate, she possesses an eerie calm, and an easy smile, as if at any moment she might morph into a Jackie Chan-like fighting machine. Her latest thing, she said, is Karaoke. She likes to go to Bonita Bill's underneath the Fort Myers Beach Bridge with her boyfriend and sing songs like



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Sue Paul

"I love this bar," and "My baby loves me just the way that I am." She said she went there on her recent 50th birthday, and the fact that she occasionally sings country music songs at a karaoke party is all my boyfriend's fault.

Paul said despite the fact that times are tough, her business is getting by, albeit with only six orders in the last two weeks.

"We're not breaking records but, knock on wood, but we're really doing a good job of maintaining," she said.

She sells her kits mostly to businesses — a lot of restaurants, car repair shops, the construction industry — anywhere

a first aid kit might come in handy for a large group of people. Her kits are, in fact, specifically geared for use by a wide variety of people. Everything comes in individual packaging so, for example, two different people don't use the same cut cream. And in the Sue's Safety catalogue, anything else a business might want for safety purposes is sold: hard hats, mannequins to practice CPR on, even a new kind of powder that stops bleeding, which was developed by the military.

"I was down at Naples Beach Hotel, and I was actually in the middle of pitching the product and one of the girls from the kitchen came in with a big cut on her finger, and I just poured a little bit of it on, and it stopped the bleeding," sales manager Bryan Simpson said.

Sue's Safety services over 800 locations in Southwest Florida with her supplier, the same one she's used for over 14 years, American First Aid. Paul also donates supplies to some non-profits, like ECHO and Harry Chapin Food Bank. She will also continue practicing another lesson in business she learned from her father, she said — keep it simple with no service contracts or minimum orders for customers, they can feel free to order from her at will with no strings attached.

In addition, Paul said she plans to expand her karaoke repertoire for Bonita Bill's patrons. ■

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Web: www.DandCRealty.com  
Email: Tom@DandCRealty.com

5252 Summerlin Commons Blvd., Suite 101  
Fort Myers, FL 33907