

15 MINUTES

The rejuvenative power of water

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Dirty laundry from East Fort Myers' neighborhoods had taken its weekend spin cycle at East Coin Laundry (And Don't Forget Your Water) next to the U-Save on Palm Beach Boulevard. The last few warm, folded loads had been carried home Sunday evening.

"We're in the process of clearing out the money and getting it to the bank," owner Bob Fonock said, sitting in the office of the open, empty laundromat last Monday morning. "Our business here is suffering in terms of laundry...and there's certainly enough laundromats in the area."

But two 250-gallon water tanks which stand side by side in the lobby represent Fonock and his partner Roy Knott's other investment - the sale of water purified by reverse osmosis. As the temperature rises, the water sales have too.

And it's keeping their bank accounts liquid.

The water tanks are connected to the water purification set up, a mad scientist's entanglement of canisters, gauges and tubes. (Fonock and Knott built the system themselves with parts from Florida and California.)

The purified water is then dispensed to different locations around the laundromat, where it is sold for a quarter a gallon. The operation is licensed and inspected on a regular basis by the Department of Agricul-

ture; they sell about 400 gallons every day.

Outside, a woman in pajamas with a Monday scowl stood at what looked like an ATM machine, but was actually a place where customers can come and fill up their 3 or 5 gallon water jugs 24/7.

"I think if we hadn't gotten into (selling water) we'd really be in trouble," Fonock said.

Fonock, 64, fell into the water business five years ago after tangling with Glacier Beverages, which kept water vending machines on the sidewalk outside. He received no commission from those sales, and said the machines were a nuisance, since they broke down regularly. Customers would come in to get quarters for the water, then complain when they lost the money. So he kicked the company out and created his own water sales business (after working briefly with one of Glacier's competitors).

"I told them, 'You just put me in the water business,'" he said

It's been a long walk to the water for Fonock, who was trained in the hospitality industry originally. After graduating from Penn State, he became a ROTC officer and was sent to Germany for three years. There he ran an officer's club. After that, he worked as a food and beverage manager for a hotel chain in Lansing, Mich. for 10 years. When the economy started to slow down there - in 1982 - he took his wife and six children to Florida, looking for work.

"We purchased, I think, the first four

bedroom house in Cape Coral," he said.

He worked for South Seas Resort on Captiva Island for four years; after that he was head of the hospitality training program at Edison College for eight years. He watched the population in the Cape almost triple; Del Prado Boulevard went from one to three lanes; Pine Island Road became a divided highway.

When Edison College did away with the hospitality program, Fonock found himself unemployed again. He looked into owning an ice cream store and a restaurant before deciding on a laundromat. His first was on College Parkway, 11 years ago. He moved it to Palm Beach Boulevard shortly after that.

"This is one I felt we could operate as a family," he said. "We had six kids - now most are gone, married; one moved to Baltimore, two are firefighters, one works for a doctor, one works for a steel company..."

Fonock considered his own childhood, and how things have changed since then.

"We used to walk to school," he said. "We knew all the neighbors. That environment doesn't seem to exist today - in Florida, anyway. It's not as neighborly because of the lack of tenure. Some of the people we know have lived here three, four, five years. There is a neighbor from Wisconsin, one from Ohio, one from Michigan, New Jersey."

And Fonock, who is originally from Bridgeport, Penn., pointed out that Pennsylvania was one of the original 13 colo-



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Bob Fonock

nies, so the neighborhoods there are more mature.

"Florida is still developing," he said. "One guy at the end of the street has lived there all his life, I think - Kenny King. Everyone else is from somewhere else." ■

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