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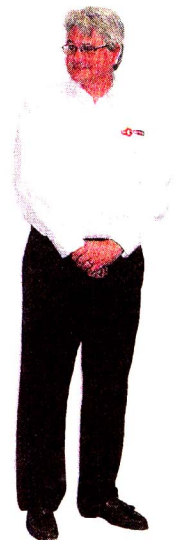
By, for and about the people of northern Anne Arundel County

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He's an actor, she's a mezzo, together they're just



HANDY



Couple moves from performing arts to fixing up client's homes

By **ALLISON BOURG**
Staff Writer

By day, Kevin Crysler and Diana Cantrelle make a living by helping Anne Arundel County homeowners with their most annoying tasks.

Need a light fixture repaired? A window installed? The married couple, who bought the Mr. Handyman franchise in Millersville over the summer, can hook you up.

The business is the nation's largest full-service home repair and maintenance franchise, and the top employer of handymen in the country. It's also a line of work that Crysler and Cantrelle probably wouldn't be expected to pursue.

Crysler's a former actor, singer and producer who's performed all over the country. His wife is a classically trained opera singer who's performed all over the world.

In sounds like a pretty drastic job change, but it's really not, the couple says.

"As a freelance singer, actor, voice teacher, I've been in marketing all my life," Cantrelle said. "I have been selling a product — myself."

"It translates well," her husband added.

While both remain passionate about the performing arts, they also acknowledge that it's not always the most reliable source of income. Crysler worked for several years in fundraising for Johns Hopkins University, where he earned his MBA, then worked as a director of development for the Smithsonian Institution.

Then the economy tanked, and

he lost his job there. He was unemployed for eight months before they decided to buy the local Mr. Handyman franchise, which also serves part of Prince George's County.

"I wanted to be my own boss. Plus, we're too weird to work for anyone else," Crysler quipped.

"It was something you were meant to do," Cantrelle told him.

The Columbia couple doesn't really advertise their artistic backgrounds to customers, though Cantrelle was tapped to sing at their graduation from Handyman University — the mandatory training for all new franchise owners. Customers who do learn that Mr. (and Mrs.) Handyman are performers tend to be intrigued.

"Well, that's cool," said frequent customer Beth Ulrich, who's called Mr. Handyman numerous times as she prepares to sell her house in Severn. "It's always good to have something else to fall back on."

Crysler got into acting as a high school student in Dallas, and decided then that he wanted to grow up to be a performer. However, his guidance counselors dismissed his aspirations as unrealistic.

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Photos by Allison Bourg — Maryland Gazette
Diana Cantrelle and Kevin Crysler have made the leap from the arts to home repair.

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"They asked me what I wanted to do, and I said I want to be an actor," Crysler said. "They said no, what do you want to do for your job? So I said OK, I guess I'll go be a businessman. I went a whole different way."

He graduated from the University of Georgia with a degree in marketing and went on to work in sales and customer service at a mobile home dealership in South Carolina. He enjoyed his work, but left when he saw that the business wasn't working out and was likely to go under.

"So I figured, now I'm a grown-up, and I still want to be an actor," Crysler recalled.

He auditioned at the Academy Theatre in Atlanta, won a role and was off and running. In the years that followed, Crysler made a living through theater and film appearances, plus TV spots and radio voiceovers.

He met his future bride at the Atlanta Opera Studio, where they were cast in a

show, "La Serva Padrona," together.

"I was the butler and she was the maid. We gave that opera a whole new subtext," Crysler quipped. "It really was love at first sight."

The couple doesn't like to say when they met or got married, careful to avoid age bias in the opera world. But in some ways, they appear destined to end up together.

They laughed as they recalled an over-the-top radio commercial a young Crysler recorded for his job at the mobile home dealership. The "obnoxious" ad was played all over South Carolina, and Cantrelle would cringe and change the station whenever she heard it on jaunts through the South.

Years later, after they wed, Crysler was going through some old stuff when he came across a recording of the commercial.

"He said, hey, listen to this! And I went, oh my God, I married that?" said Cantrelle, chuckling.

Cantrelle, a Florida native, said she always knew she wanted to be a performer, but didn't start studying opera until she went to

Florida State University. A dramatic mezzo-soprano, she also writes her own operas, fulfilling a longtime dream.

"That was my 9/11 epiphany," said Cantrelle, now in the middle of creating an opera version of the children's story Puss In Boots. "If I lost my life in a second, what would I wish I'd done? It was to get back to writing music."

Now in a master's degree program at Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, Cantrelle is the best sounding board the business has, Crysler said. Most of the time, it's the female in the house who calls for services.

"They have the honey do list," Crysler said.

His wife can relate, he said.

The couple employs four technicians and two customer service representatives, with plans to possibly expand in the spring.

"This is a growing area, and people are always going to need a handyman," Crysler said.

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