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Charles County, Maryland

From halls of power to drywall

■ Former lobbyist opens handyman franchise

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Staff writer

Lee Allen spent 10 years as a registered lobbyist, working mainly in Washington, D.C., but last year he dropped out. Now he is literally Mr. Handyman, having bought franchise rights from the national home repair company. He set up shop last May.

Actually, Allen is not a handyman himself, but he runs the office in La Plata, which is licensed by the state, and sends his three employees out to do jobs.

A desire to spend more time with family is a hoary political trope, but in Allen's case it truly was the reason for his radical career change, he said. He tired of the daily commute from Indian Head to the city while other trips, sometimes to foreign countries, took him away from home for days at a time.

"I was kind of a Beltway Bandit. I spent more — seemingly I spent more time on the Beltway traveling from meeting to meeting in my professional life than I did in my personal life. I have three small children, and they didn't understand what I was doing for a living. I was away for a lot. If you ask what Daddy does, [they would have said,] 'He types on his computer and he meets with people.' They really couldn't grasp it," Allen said.

Now the kids serve as company ambassadors. To attract new customers, Mr. Handyman holds free hot dog days in its office parking lot and distributes water bottles, gum and magnets from a van outside of Regency Furniture Stadium on game days. Often he brings his "three very, very beautiful kids" along.

"I put them in Mr. Handyman T-shirts. I'm not above, I guess you would call it guerrilla marketing. I'm not above that," Allen said.

He gives free Southern Maryland Blue Crabs tickets to his technicians, if they'll



Staff photo by EMILY BARNES

Lee Allen, president and owner of Mr. Handyman, works with lead service technician Richy Fox (not shown) to replace a range mount microwave for a client in Waldorf this week.

wear their uniforms to the game.

By design, his choice of trade meshes with his wife's — Jennifer Allen is a real estate agent. When clients ask — as they often do — for the name of a good handyman to get a home ready for sale, she refers them to Mr. Handyman, Allen said. Before, she didn't have a good answer, he said.

"It has worked so well because one of the things I did when I started the business was, using her contacts ... I was able to call real estate brokers and agencies here in Southern Maryland and say, 'Hey, can I come in, bring doughnuts and talk to your agents? Because I have a solution for them for a very common problem.'"

Now might be a good time to get into the home improvement business because people have resigned themselves to staying in their homes, not switching to a new one every few years, he said.

Of the housing market collapse, Allen said it is "bad news for the economy of the county and the area, but in all situations there is opportunity ... houses aren't as disposable

as they used to be. Instead of trading up people are putting money into their house, making the house that they live in more livable: 'I can't go buy a new house, so maybe I'll remodel my bathroom.'"

F. Hamer Campbell Jr., government affairs director for the Maryland-National Capital Building Industry Association, said he would not be surprised if house pride were channeled into renovation of existing homes.

"[There is] the fact that in a number of areas there are a lot of foreclosures," Campbell said. "Now houses are not selling, prices have dropped, people who might want to buy a new home are reluctant to put their own on the market. They're afraid they're not going to get the value they had three to four years ago, before the recession."

But Charles County figures suggest that the economic downturn has made homeowners less likely, not more, to finance improvement projects. Statistics compiled by the county Department of Planning and Growth Management show that permits issued for residential alter-

ations and additions peaked in 2006 at 672 and have declined steadily thereafter to 310 in 2009. In 2010, 317 such permits were issued.

While projects handled by Allen's service might not be large enough to require a county permit, real estate agent Bill Wootan of Century 21 H.T. Brown Real Estate in Waldorf said he has seen no heightened interest in renovation among his clients, and that the labor market is glutted with qualified workers willing to take ever-smaller jobs.

"I haven't run into somebody that's doing major renovations rather than selling. We're selling our house, it's been on the market three times, but we've done all the renovating we're going to do to our place and we're not going to do anymore."

I don't think it's a really real remark," Wootan said of the idea that now would be a good time to be a handyman. "... There are guys who used to build houses now come in, repair drywall and do all kinds of things."

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