



Photo by Scott Longfield

Customers Get The Royal Treatment At Queen Vacuum And Sewing Machine Company

By Eleanor O'Sullivan

ON A RECENT blustery morning drenched in rain, John Decker was surrounded by women in the clean-as-a-whistle workshop of Queen Vacuum and Sewing Machine Company, 156 Monmouth St., Red Bank.

"Ninety percent of our customers are women, which partially accounts for our new name," Decker says under the humming of a vacuum just cleaned and repaired by associate Erika Raidma, Decker's ally in keeping at least 20 different brands of vacuums tuned up and ready to help customers' dispatch of household detritus.

Formerly Graman's, an Old School, no frills vacuum sales and repair business operated by the Graman family of River Plaza for about half a century, Queen Vacuum is owned and operated by Decker, 34, and his wife, Rachel Decker, 29. She's a graphic designer who keeps the books and accounts at the store, waits on customers, does marketing and some repair work. A comfortable leather and oak couch is positioned at the center of the showroom's blue carpeting, giving customers the perfect vantage point to watch the Deckers or Raidma, 28, demonstrate the various vacuums, priced starting at \$69.99 (the Dirt Devil) up to \$999.00 (the Sebo from Germany).

Longtime Graman customers might be surprised to see spring flowers artfully arranged in a pretty vase in the showroom, but Decker, an automotive mechanic by trade who worked for Graman in the 1990s, said it's all part of "softening the place.

"Let's face it, we want women to feel comfortable when they come in here," Decker says.

At 10:10 a.m., two older women entered the store and explained they had a vacuum in their car. Decker, after putting on his jacket, immediately walked outside in the rain and brought the machine into the shop. Several male customers dropped by, as well, including one who exchanged "Dude" hellos with Decker as he waited to pick up his Miele vacuum.

The Deckers kept the '50s' modern aluminum siding front and the original Graman's sign, reassuring reminders of years of quality service and dependable merchandise. Just west of the storefront is a new freestanding Queen Vacuum sign. Refrigerator-friendly business cards say Queen Vacuum and give the Website address - www.queenvacuum.com. The cards were designed by Rachel Decker, who got their retro look inspiration at 5:30 one morning.

In the display area, customers can easily examine vacuums and accessories, made by, among others, Hoover, Dirt Devil, Sebo, Lindhaus (an Italian company), Kirby, Oreck, Kenmore, Bissell and Electrolux.

The Deckers say they no longer carry bagless vacuums, because they require four times the repair of conventional machines, and they were able to convince customers that better machines are actually a better buy in the long run. Rachel Decker says customers lean toward the opposite ends of the price spectrum when buying a vacuum.

"The more expensive machines have much tighter seals and much stronger filtration and suction," she explains.

"Our prices are fair and we tell customers to Google the machine they want and compare prices. They'll see we're honest," Decker says.

The Deckers were married in 2002 and bought the business in 2003; they rent the premises from Gene Graman, who owns the building. Decker grew up in River Plaza and was a neighbor of the Graman family, hence his '90s' stint working at the store. At the moment, Queen Vacuum is a stalwart in the ever-changing fortunes of downtown Red Bank business. The storefront next door has been vacant for several years, as has the building and large lot across the street (once earmarked for condos, until the project was successfully blocked in court). Juanito's restaurant, at 159 Monmouth, continues to prosper, and the recent arrival of Fins & Feathers, 134 Monmouth Street, has brought more customers toward the western end of Monmouth Street, Decker says.

Bits of whimsy attest to the old-school values of the Deckers - a giant marlin hangs from the east wall, caught by Graman - and a sign reading "My Name Isn't Monty Hall and This Isn't "Let's Make a Deal."

"It's kind of our good-humored way of telling people we have our prices as low as we can, just so that we can exist," Rachel Decker says.

Queen Vacuum also sells and services sewing machines, and customers may get their big screen plasma TVs fixed through the store by an expert in the field based in Atlantic Highlands. Decker says one of his role models was Marilyn Smith, who ran Smith Vacuums in Manasquan for 40 years, where she sold and repaired vacuums. Raidma, who works part time, is the next generation.

"It might make the hair on a certain kind of man's neck stand up, but listen, I had three guys here before Erika, and they were consumed by their cell phones and romantic situations," Decker says.

The machine Raidma had just tuned up hummed nicely during a test run. The store cat, Bruiser, rescued from thoughtless owners, purred nearby.

The Deckers suggest customers can reduce repairs if they will change the vacuum bag at least once a month; change the filter regularly, and keep the machine unclogged of hairs and other impediments.

Queen Vacuum is open 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday (closed Sunday). More information is available from (732) 747-5623, or www.queenvacuum.com.