

BUSINESSMAN SHARES HIS ZEST FOR LIFE GAS STATION OWNER HELPS LESS FORTUNATE

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Around Easter one year, when Paul Gonnelli Jr. still was operating his gas station in Philadelphia more than 20 years ago, he bought 2,500 chicks for \$25. Customers at his station each got two chicks with a fill-up.

"I sold more gas that weekend," Gonnelli remembers with a chuckle.

Not surprisingly, that promotional adventure came home to roost.

"When the chicks grew up, I had customers bringing them back," he says.

At the Boca Raton service station that Gonnelli has been running for nearly 20 years on North Federal Highway, he doesn't use the gimmicks that used to draw customers in Philly. But he still seems to draw the people.

Maybe it's because the employees will fix a flat tire the day it runs out of air. Or maybe they've heard that the Phillips 66 station has won a company image award this year for being the cleanest in the state. It may be that people are attracted to a gas station where attendants will offer to check the oil, even at the self-service pumps.

Or, the idea of a working owner may be the attraction. Pull in to the station any day of the week and there's Gonnelli, pumping gas, washing a car, or chatting with a customer.

Or, the attraction may be Gonnelli himself, known citywide for his ferocious fund-raising abilities and his opinionated ways.

there," Gonnelli, 57, says. "I know almost all of the customers by name. I'm a working

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Many of his customers appreciate his efforts.

"The personal touch means a lot," says Ed O'Cleary, who has been going to Gonnelli's station for about three years. "He's out there working everyday. He's not aloof from hard manual labor."

Gonnelli's gas station is a gold mine. Situated on the edge of downtown, Gonnelli says he gets offers nearly every day for the property; offers as high as \$2.6 million.

"It gets tempting," he says. "But if I sold it, what would I do? I enjoy being out there on the island, talking to people. That's what I would miss."

Gonnelli says he is usually at the station six days a week, starting about 6:30 a.m. and leaving about 5 p.m.

Fran McMurray, Gonnelli's fiance and the station's bookkeeper, reminds him that he usually runs home for dinner at 5 p.m. Then he's back.

"To him it's not a job," McMurray says. "It's pure pleasure."

His hard work shows. Although on a Wednesday afternoon, Gonnelli is apologizing for the station's disarray. The place is cleaner than one would imagine a gas station could be. The grounds are nicely landscaped, tasteful Christmas decorations are up and the building is adorned with the expensive red barrel-tile roofing that is a city trademark.

Many of the elements that fuel Gonnelli's life can be seen at the station. There's McMurray and Gonnelli's son-in-law, Barry Brice, who manages the repair shop; there's his collection of license plates (one from every state) adorning the wall, next to the numerous awards for his volunteer efforts; and his cherished collection of old newspapers are stacked in a trunk and boxes there.

But most of the time, Gonnelli is simply attending to the business of selling gas and fixing cars; a business he has been associated with since his high school days, with just a three-year absence while he served in the U.S. Coast Guard.

A native of Pennsylvania, Gonnelli got tired of the cold weather and brought his family to Boca Raton in 1968.

"(Boca Raton) was uncluttered at that time," Gonnelli says. "It turned out to be the right move."

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"They have great service," says Jamie Snyder, the chairman of the Community Redevelopment Agency and a longtime customer at the station. "Paul is really active in the community and runs a really good shop. He always has something to say on various issues.

Even when Gonnelli's not selling gas, he's usually selling something.

Gonnelli sold the most tickets to the Rotary Club's major fund-raising event last year, and probably will again this year, says O'Cleary, also a member of the Rotary Club.

Gonnelli joined the service organization after it honored him in 1984 for his tremendous fund-raising efforts in 1983 that saved the life of Boca Raton resident Frank Blome. A 37-year-old victim of congestive heart failure, Blome was dying and could not afford a heart transplant.

Although Gonnelli had never met the man before, he launched a crusade that raised nearly \$200,000 and saved the man's life. Last Sunday, they were out fishing together.

Gonnelli says he likes to help needy people.

"He's one of the last great individuals," Snyder says. "He's one of the people that makes this a community."

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