

Wilshire Sentry Market A Family Affair



Tom Conklin, owner of Wilshire Park Supermarket, is shown flanked by wife, Joie (L) and son Pat, on right. Photo by Richard J. Brown

To Tom Conklin, working in a supermarket is almost as much fun as owning one. Almost. The difference being, of course, family security and the challenge of making your investment work successfully.

The 39-year-old former box boy from Fred Meyer's Grocery fell in love with the grocery business at the age of 15 and, with the exception of a brief stint as a real estate agent, has remained close to it ever since.

When the opportunity to purchase the old IGA grocery on 33rd Ave. in the Wilshire Park area of Northeast Portland came about last summer, Conklin jumped at the opportunity. After a brief closure for remodeling and expansion, the store re-opened last August as part of the fast-growing Sentry Markets chain.

With his wife Joie, who serves as bookkeeper and handles dairy products (sons Pat and Craig are day and night managers respectively), the business offers an atmosphere that compliments its customers and the neighborhood.

Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, the store caters largely to neighboring residents who like the convenience of the

in-house snack bar and delicatessen. In fact, "The popularity of the two eateries is a major factor in the gradual customer increase," according to Tom. "More and more of the old neighborhood crowd are returning, and they, along with the new shoppers, add a vote of confidence to my decision to invest in this business," he added.

In listening to Tom's philosophy on entrepreneurship, he clearly brings into focus the respect he maintains for the first rule of owning your own business: turn a profit. "In this business, you must have customer satisfaction—without it, you have problems.

"When I first took over this franchise, I had some ideas about some things that needed to be done if the business was going to survive. A neighborhood grocery must know its shoppers' likes and dislikes—stocking items that are regularly purchased or requested and adopting a business/community relationship that compliments the neighborhood. When we expanded, we decided to add a larger variety of grocery items, placing special emphasis on the produce, meat and dairy sections. Our produce manager does an

excellent job of offering produce shoppers a large and attractive selection of fresh produce and fruits. The newly installed delicatessen with its meats, pastas and salads is very popular. The snack bar now has 12 employees as opposed to the initial 3, due to our lunch and river traffic," stated Tom.

With most of his employees being hold-overs from the previous owner, they pride themselves in being on a first name basis with a large percentage of the neighborhood shoppers (mostly seniors). As an added service, escort service to the customer's vehicle is provided upon request at night by the store's security.

Holding the lease on the entire facility (the complex also houses a coin-operated laundromat and dry cleaners), Conklin does not rule out the possibility of further expansion. "If we generate a need or if customer interest mandates it, we will consider it," he added.

One thing is for sure: the family-operated business has long-range plans for keeping Sentry a family-operated business. Waiting in the wings are three more Conklin offsprings who are eager to learn the business, as well.

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