



Staff photo by Stacy Zelens

Richard and Betsy Lee stand in the office of their Malvern-based Mr. Handyman franchise. The Lees bought the franchise when Richard Lee was told that after 32 years in the insurance industry, the only way to keep his job would be to move to Boston. Mr. Handyman sends technicians to homes to perform routine maintenance jobs.

Handyman to the rescue

Husband and wife open Malvern-based maintenance franchise

By JENNIFER HARRIS
Staff Writer

After 32 years in the insurance industry, Richard Lee was told that in order to stay with Prudential Property and Casualty Co. he and his family would have to move to Boston.

Rather than abandon his native Philadelphia, Lee and his wife, Betsy, decided to jump into a completely different industry, and purchase a franchise.

After looking at restaurants and storefronts, the Lees chose Mr. Handyman, a

business that nicely complemented Richard Lee's lifelong interest in home repairs and small electrical work.

For \$65 for the first half-hour, and \$35 for each subsequent half-hour, Mr. Handyman sends technicians to homes to perform routine maintenance jobs such as grouting, pressure washing and gutter cleaning — jobs too small for contractors or carpenters but just difficult enough to dismay a homeowner lacking tools or time.

"The tasks we perform are simple," Richard Lee said. "Some people would just rather spend their time playing golf or tennis on the weekends."

Betsy Lee has a simpler explanation. "Handymen call and give us their wireless of chores," Betsy Lee said. "We call it the 'Honey-Do List.' She added that

their service was useful for the wife whose honey doesn't.

Once the Lees had decided upon Mr. Handyman — which has 118 franchises across the U.S. and Canada — they were able to set up their Malvern-based franchise in a mere three weeks, including one week of company training in Ann Arbor, Mich. Richard Lee said the transition from the corporate world to a franchise was "nerve-racking."

"Coming from the corporate world, there's always someone who knows how to handle what you need done," he said. "Here, there's no marketing department, no tech support. We are all those people now."

Although Lee said he found his expe-

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periences working with customers in insurance was extremely helpful, there were still an incredible number of details to handle in setting up Mr. Handyman. For those first few weeks, Lee said he felt that he had been "living on the edge every day."

Now, two months into operation, the Lees' business employs two technicians and performs between 10 and 30 jobs per week. The customer response, the Lees said, has been overwhelmingly positive.

"You really get a sense from talking with people of 'Oh my Lord, I've been looking for this for years,'" Betsy Lee said.

The favorable response may be due to what Richard Lee called a commitment to "superior customer service." According to Richard Lee, Mr. Handyman technicians arrive on time, wearing shoe covers, photo ID badges and uniforms. They come in the very distinctive Mr. Handyman van, never wear sunglasses or smell like smoke, and leave homes clean. Customers can even find the technicians' photos on the Mr. Handyman Web site before they arrive. In addition to all of that, Lee likes to personally

greet as many customers as he can at their homes.

"We want to make the whole process safe, comfortable and pleasurable," Richard Lee said.

The Lees said the business is doing as well as or better than they predicted, and they expect to regain their investment in the next 12 to 18 months.

They plan to continue to expand the business, hiring a third technician some time later in the year. The Lees are also thinking of expanding the array of services Mr. Handyman offers, a process in which they have a high degree of freedom from the company. In particular, Lee said he is thinking of offering help with simple computer tasks such as data transfer and printer installation that might be below the radar of typical tech support.

Also, given the area in which the Lees' franchise is located, they are thinking of developing ways to customize their services for seniors living in retirement communities.

Despite the difficulties such a drastic career change entails, the Lees said they truly enjoy their new business.

"It's fun talking to people. It's fun to do something people like," Richard Lee said. "I could never be a dentist."