

GREEN INVADERS

From nuts and bolts to Soap Nuts at Wagner Hardware.

WHEN NEW LIVING: HEALTHY HOME ESSENTIALS OPENED for business at the beginning of this year, the store's entire inventory fit on three shelving units poised just inside the front door of a 70-year-old hardware store in Rice Village.

"It started off as an experiment," says Jeff Kaplan, one of New Living's founders. Less than six months later, his experiment in green retailing may not be ready to emerge from its hardware-store laboratory—but it is beginning to take over the lab.

Those three initial shelving units, welded from angle brackets of recycled steel and attached to reused casters so they could be rolled into position, took the place of what had been a single aisle inside Wagner Hardware. "It was an entire aisle of nuts and screws," says Tiffan C. Wong, New Living's manager. Once the hardware items had been moved to the back of the store—and Wagner employee Arthur Buchanan had carted the fixed metal shelving upstairs into storage—Wong wheeled New Living's mobile displays into place. On top of the plywood shelves ("the best we could find at Home Depot," Wong says) went New Living's newer, greener products: three-packs of biodegradable European sponge cloths called Twist (each of which, both Wong and the package claim, will last as long as 17 rolls of paper towels); Soap Nuts ("it's like laundry detergent that grows on trees," she explains); and Yolo Colorhouse interior house paint with zero VOCs (volatile organic compounds, solvents that pollute indoor air).

Gene Wagner founded Wagner Hardware in 1938 and built the current store on Kirby Drive seven years later. Today his daughter, Nancy Abernathy, owns and manages the store. She perches behind the register at the front, ringing up customer purchases of both Wagner and New Living items. From the moment last year when Kaplan first described to her his concept of a "green general store" planted inside Wagner, Abernathy knew it would be a good match. "I thought it would give the tired hardware store a new outlook," she says. "Update it."

Kaplan and founding partner Adam Brackman met Wong—now a partner and New Living's only full-time employee—through an ad they posted on craigslist.org last fall, seeking a "social entrepreneur passionate about green living." Wong, who has a background in environmental research and forestry, also had retail experience.

Starting small has allowed New

Living time to figure out what it wants to be when it grows up. "We're truly learning from the market," says Kaplan. "It's given us an opportunity to talk to people and find out what their needs are and how to evolve the store. There was no way to predict what direction we should go in." Wong has a more blunt assessment of the store's character: "It's like a virus."

By April 22, Earth Day, that virus was ready to spread further into Wagner's recesses. Out went a second aisle: plumbing supplies. In rolled more mobile shelving units, which Wong over the course of several weeks slowly populated with still more eco-friendly home products: wool and sisal samples from Nature's Carpet; IceStone, a Cradle-to-Cradle-Certified countertop material made of recycled glass and cement; and American Clay plaster. Outside the store, a new window graphic covering the storefront proclaimed, "It's easy being green," but still made no mention of the new store growing steadily inside of it.

And so the willful blending of the two stores' identities began. Early on, Wong could easily figure, as they came through the door, which customers had come for hard-

ware and which had come for New Living's products. But those separate groups have slowly grown less distinct.

"They have Kilz primer. We have no-VOC paint," she continues. "They have seriously toxic pesticides; we have organic fertilizers and organic bug killer. You could say we're moving from nuts and bolts . . . to Soap Nuts." New Living's steady expansion through the aisles of Wagner Hardware mirrors the growing popularity of ecologically friendly products among its customers. And one enables the other.

One early New Living customer was Beaver's, Monica Pope's new ice house and barbecue joint in the Sixth Ward. The restaurant's tables have surfaces of Kirei—a Japanese panel made from sorghum stalks that New Living sells for more than \$300 a sheet. When Beaver's ended up with an extra table with uneven legs, Wong brought it in, placed it by the front door, and stacked it with copies of William McDonough's *Cradle to Cradle*, a book that encourages designers to use "the intelligence of natural systems" to create products that work for both commerce and the environment. "We're recycling an old space," Kaplan says. "We want to be scrappy. You don't have to start over; you should be resourceful and work with what you have."

The steady progress of New Living's products—on mobile and fixed shelving units—continues. Among the latest items to find their way onto the advancing shelves: spray bottles of Lucky Earth Waterless Car Wash and a solar-powered backpack.

Kaplan now says New Living is ready to take over the whole store. He is in the process of signing a new lease agreement with Abernathy, who plans to stay on to help with the transition. But even after New Living has overwhelmed its host, the Wagner

Hardware sign will stay on top of the building—as a marquee, Kaplan says. Inside will be a venture that's grown strong enough to repopulate the store, filling it with products intended for people who want a more environmentally conscious focus to their lives. Kaplan and Wong imagine it will serve as a resource center, too, for people interested in learning about green product choices.

Kaplan does not know what the store will look like next year, once it subsumes Wagner Hardware entirely. That build-out has not been designed yet. He imagines the registers will be in a counter built into the center of the space. But he likes the idea of keeping everything else in the store on wheels.

-Larry Albert



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Adam Brackman, Anat Kaufman (commercial rep), Jeff Kaplan, Tiffan C. Wong.