

'Wrong turn' proves to be right

Five years ago, Ajay Patel drove away from a Scottsdale Road motel with every intention of heading west on Shea Boulevard in search of a new business venture.

He made a wrong turn and began traveling east until he "ran into Fountain Hills."

"It was the most fortunate wrong turn I ever made," recalls Patel. "I immediately fell in love with Fountain Hills. I returned to my hotel room, and began searching on the Internet for businesses that might be for sale in the area."

He and his wife, Veena, found two businesses: a Cold Stone Creamery franchise and Le Baron Cleaners.

"I made an offer to the previous owner of Le Baron and was pleasantly surprised when he accepted it," says Patel.

They are observing the fifth anniversary of the full-service laundry/dry cleaners in Fountain Hills Plaza, located at the southwest corner of Palisades Boulevard and La Montana Drive. The cleaner is organic, using carbon-based solvents.

The couple has turned a struggling operation into a successful retailer by concentrating on customer service.

Le Baron Cleaners served nearly 16,000 customers in 2009, providing a variety of services, including full-service laundry and cleaning, shoe repair, alterations, wedding gown preservation, cleaning of household items, leather and suede clothing, and oriental rugs.

Chris Gerardo, vice

president of leasing for The Pederson Group, developers of Fountain Hills Plaza, said the Patels "have developed a community-wide reputation for taking that extra step to ensure customer satisfaction."

Over the years, they have ingratiated themselves to the entire community by providing residents of the trade area with great service and willingness to always say "yes."

A native of Zambia, Ajay met Veena in London. Since immigrating to the United States in 1994, they have lived in Georgia, Oklahoma and most recently Huntington Beach, Calif.

They operated a cleaning business in Huntington Beach and a gas station in Atlanta.

They have a son Shivam, 13, and a daughter Tulsi, 11, both Fountain Hills Middle School pupils.

"When we first arrived in Fountain Hills," Ajay recalls, "we had to overcome many obstacles, including a bad reputation for customer service that was held over from the previous ownership."

"Veena and I are not afraid of hard work, and we made a commitment early on to restore confidence in our business by providing top quality customer service and making people feel at home."

"One of the ways we did this was to learn the first names of all of our customers and make sure that we developed new business through positive word of mouth."

The business offers same-day service without additional charge. They are the only cleaners invited to participate in the Verdes'

preferred business rewards program.

Public service employees and military personnel receive a 40 percent discount.

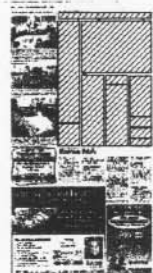
"About 40 percent of our sales come from business customers in and around the Fountain Hills area," Ajay says. "We have been fortunate over the years to cultivate on-going relationships with a number of the area's leading businesses."

Matt Ezor, director of rooms for the Radisson-Fort McDowell Resort & Casino, said Le Baron Cleaners "has been providing our guests with first-class, same-day valet laundry service since we opened the resort in 2005."

Over the past five years, the Patels have proven to be a valuable business partner that gives our guests a worry-free answer to their garment laundry and cleaning needs, and is an amenity that enables them to more fully enjoy their stay at the resort. Their professional approach and expertise is highly-valued by our guest services team."

Other corporate clients include SunRidge Canyon Golf Club, Radisson-Fort McDowell Casino and Fountain View Village retirement community.

Their commitment to customer service has paid off. Mary Kay and her husband, Rocky, have been customers almost since the first day the Patels purchased Le Baron Cleaners. "We were then residing in Fountain Hills," says Mrs. Kay, "and shortly thereafter we moved to Scottsdale. "But I still make the 15 to 20 minute drive to Fountain Hills to have Ajay and



Veena do my laundry and dry cleaning because they take great care of my garments and provide excellent service.

"I look forward to my

weekly visit to their establishment because of their outgoing personalities and their friendliness."

If you own an American flag that needs cleaning,

the naturalized citizens never charge for that service.

Le Baron Cleaners can be contacted at 837-0502.



Ajay and Veena Patel are observing the fifth anniversary of owning Le Baron Cleaners in Fountain Hills Plaza, southwest corner of Palisades Boulevard and La Montana Drive.