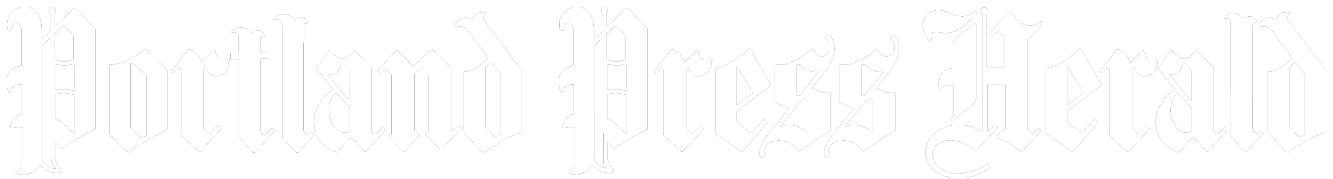


Bill Nemitz: Local business washes away a big-box store nightmare

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By Bill Nemitz Columnist

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The older I get, the more I like local businesses.

Take Central Furniture and Appliance Inc. in Sanford, owned and operated by brothers Mark and Matt Rouillard. They don't let a day pass without remembering Roland Couture, their late grandfather and founder of the business, whose portrait looks down in perpetuity from a wall next to the reception desk.

"My grandfather was an incredibly sharing person," Mark Rouillard, 43, said during my visit to the store Friday. "His memory is the conscience of this operation. And so, when we do things like this, we think it honors his memory."

More about what they did in a minute. First, a story that started, of all places, with Home Depot.

Back on Feb. 22, Doug MacDonald heard a knock on his front door in Scarborough's Higgins Beach neighborhood, where he rented over the winter while his home underwent renovations.

There stood two delivery guys, ready and eager to deliver and install a new washer and dryer fresh from Home Depot's store in South Portland.

"I don't know anything about this," MacDonald told them. "I would think my property manager would let me know there's a delivery coming today."

But the delivery men persisted. They showed him the paperwork with the street address on Greenwood Avenue and the name "O'Connor" as owner of the property, which is in fact owned by one Kevin O'Connor of Massachusetts.

MacDonald, having dealt only with the property manager, had never actually met O'Connor. But he recognized the last name and reluctantly let the men in.

In went the new washer and dryer. And out to the truck went the old ones.

Hours later, MacDonald's phone rang. It was the property manager, who had just heard from Home Depot: It turned out the delivery should have gone to the home next door, whose unrelated owner also happens to be named O'Connor.

Understandably, Home Depot wanted its new appliances back.

"So they came out and they took them back and I was assuming they'd bring the old ones back," MacDonald recalled in an interview Friday. "They didn't."

MacDonald called the store to ask about returning the old units.

"They told me, 'Yeah, we looked. They're gone,'" he said.

Welcome to retail purgatory.

For the better part of a month, not wanting to bother his landlord with such a mindless matter, MacDonald tried to resolve the screw-up on his own.

The best he could get out of Home Depot was an offer to replace the washer and dryer for half price. The appliance department manager's rationale: By accepting the delivery, he was at least partially responsible for what happened.

"I was in absolute shock when she said that," MacDonald said.

The battle went on. MacDonald eventually alerted Kevin O'Connor, who teaches at Phillips Academy Andover and decided to push back. Hard.

O'Connor told the story to The Boston Globe's consumer affairs reporter. The article ran four weeks ago and included a promise from Home Depot's corporate headquarters in Atlanta for a new washer and dryer, delivered and installed, at no charge.

Never happened.

O'Connor also enlisted his brother-in-law, Portland attorney Ken Pierce, to rattle Home Depot's cage. That led to emails and phone calls with a company lawyer, as well as a visit to the store by Pierce that ended with the appliance manager's abrupt refusal to discuss the matter – except to deny that the replacement deal included free installation.

That's when Pierce finally threatened to sue.

"Your clients never took or flunked Customer Service 101," he wrote to Home Depot's regional counsel in Connecticut. "What they did and have done is nothing short of outrageous."

Which brings us back to Central Furniture and Appliance.

Originally, Pierce planned to take the Boston Globe article to Lowe's in Scarborough and see if they'd be interested in helping to right their archrival's wrong. But then a fellow lawyer at Monaghan Leahy LLP, where Pierce works, had a better idea.

Forget about the big box stores, his colleague suggested. Go local – and if you're looking for a place that knows how to treat people right, try these guys.

It was not an idle recommendation. Back in December, after a thief broke into a safe at the Salvation Army in Sanford and made off with \$1,700 in Christmas donations, the Rouillard brothers stepped up – again in their grandfather's memory – and replaced the lost funds.

Mark Rouillard is not one to badmouth the competition, or anyone else for that matter. Yet when Pierce told him the story of the vanishing washer and dryer, Rouillard was astounded at how something so easy could become so difficult.

"It seems like they had multiple opportunities to do the right thing," he said. "And at every turn, they chose the opposite."

Rouillard, upon hearing what had happened, didn't bat an eye. Tell your brother-in-law we'll give him a new washer and dryer, install it and throw in our service plan, he told Pierce. No charge.

"They're great," an appreciative Kevin O'Connor said in a telephone interview Friday. "They know how to deal with people."

Now for the real forehead-smacking part.

Last week, after multiple backs-and-forths, Pierce and the Home Depot lawyer agreed to settle the matter for \$5,000. At Pierce's insistence, the deal contains no confidentiality clause.

Home Depot spokeswoman Margaret Smith confirmed the agreement in an email Friday, adding, "We are truly sorry for the confusion as well as the inconvenience caused to Mr. O'Connor and his tenant. We appreciate the opportunity to make it right."

Left unexplained is why Home Depot didn't just replace Kevin O'Connor's long-lost washer and dryer – at far less time and expense – in the first place.

When the \$5,000 check arrives, Pierce will distribute it among all of those affected by the debacle. Meaning Central Appliance and Furniture will get paid, after all.

Or not.

"We have a charitable budget," Rouillard said. "We sponsor a lot of teams. We'll throw it back into our budget and do something else good with it."

Seventeen years after he passed away, Roland Couture still gets credit for that decision.

One of 19 children who grew up in poverty just down the street from the current store, he was a Marine in World War II who served aboard the USS Missouri as an orderly to Adm. William Halsey Jr. He started the family business selling TVs and antennas out of his living room – preaching constantly that what goes around comes around and if you treat people well, it comes back to you.

“He was the greatest person I’ve ever known,” Rouillard said. “To be the steward of his legacy is an honor.”

It’s also good business. Let’s hear it for the locals.

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