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Asbury's a good fit for him

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 03/19/05

BY **NANCY SHIELDS**
 COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU

ASBURY PARK — In the midst of last year's changes and renovations downtown, six double windows appeared on the upper level of the old J.J. Newberry's building, bringing a little style to what had been a plain, salmon-colored brick facade.

It seemed that owner Leo Clark was up to something.

Clark had bought the Cookman Avenue building for \$250,000 in 2001 as a place to store his Fitness Lifestyles Company equipment that was traded in when colleges, hotels and businesses bought new equipment or a whole gym.

By last May, he knew that the city's downtown, with its new shops and restaurants, was solid. He relocated his retail operations from Route 35 in Ocean Township, consolidating them in the three-story, 56,000-square-foot building at 614 Cookman Ave. — a move that saved him \$10,000 a month in rent and maintenance.

"I'm here for the growth," Clark said. "I want to see it."

Clark, 43, says his business is thriving and the foot traffic keeps getting better. In February he combined his annual Midnight Madness Sale with the downtown merchants' "First Saturday Night" when stores and restaurants celebrate into the night.

"We were open from 10 a.m. to midnight and sold 43 pieces of equipment — treadmills, bikes, rowers, elliptical machines and kayaks," Clark said. "We had people in the store until 11:45 p.m."

Clark says the new windows will be an asset as he works out a plan to develop the building. He had plans drawn up to add a fourth floor and transform part of the building into condominiums but decided against it.

"In my mind, with residential (lofts and condos) going everywhere, there's more need for retail space," he said.

He now hopes to transform the building into three floors of high-end retail shops along with his own business.

Clark had the new windows installed with the help of a \$15,000 facade grant from the city's Urban Enterprise Zone.

"What that does is the second floor becomes very valuable space," said Thomas Gilmour, the city's director of commerce and UEZ director.

"I look at Leo as one of the pioneers down in the city," Gilmour added. "When he first came down (in the late 1980s), there was nobody. He's hung in, is doing well and has a great business going now."

Clark started in the city in 1987, operating his Fitness Lifestyles equipment and repair business at the corner of Main Street and Cookman Avenue. He paid \$300 a month rent.

He left in 1994 for the Route 35 location but was drawn back in with the opportunity to buy J.J. Newberry's when buildings downtown still cost very little.

Business so far is surpassing last year, when he still was using the Route 35 store.

Clark hopes to have about \$4.5 million in sales this year. He has 18 to 24 full- and part-time employees and seven delivery trucks. The 3 percent UEZ sales tax break for buyers helps tremendously in the high-end fitness equipment business, he said.

"You'll have no one in the store on a Monday, and then a representative from the Flanders Hotel in Ocean City walks in and buys \$30,000 in equipment for their condos," he said. That order was delivered in January.



(STAFF PHOTOS: STEVE SCHOLFIELD)

Leo Clark, owner of Fintness Lifestyles, is pleased that he moved his business to the old J.J. Newberry's building on Cookman Avenue in Asbury Park.

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A new focus of his business is the nation's growing awareness of the problem with obesity, not just in adults, but children, and he has new equipment for kids. He's also opening the store for senior citizens to come in on Wednesdays and use a walking track. The store is open seven days a week.

Sales consultant Stan Koper, 28, has worked for Clark for three years and came to Asbury when the Ocean store closed last May.

Koper said an added bonus is the new stores and restaurants around them.

"It's pretty cool," he said. "I never worked in a place where I could go next door or across the street and talk or hang out."

Of his boss, Koper says he's funny, laid-back and hard working.

"He's usually cleaning, doing all the dirty work, things you wouldn't expect the owner of a big company or successful business to do," Koper said.

Clark lives in Spring Lake with his wife, Michelle, and their seven children, ages 3 to 18.

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