



# Year-Round Santas

## Customers' Trash is Hauler's Treasure

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH MCGOWAN

When Linden and Frank Coyne first set up their Junk in the Trunk booth at DC's Green Festival last October, they felt like skunks at a garden party.

Raised eyebrows indicated their fellow exhibitors feared a rubbish hauler would only stink up this pristine bastion of sustainability. That attitude soon changed, however, when the doubters realized the Coynes weren't full of, well, garbage.

Indeed, the 33-year-old environmental entrepreneurs tote enviable conservation credentials. Last autumn, Co-op America – a nonprofit sponsor of the annual Green Festival – awarded Junk in the Trunk its Green Business Seal of Approval. It's the first of its kind to earn that premier rating.

"We're a trash company," says Linden while seated on a reclaimed couch in the couple's Bloomingdale rowhouse. "If we can do this, everybody can."

What exactly does this "greenness" entail? It's as simple as using recycled paper in the company printers, replacing incandescent light bulbs with energy-efficient compact fluorescents and offering free recycling and trash pickup at community events. And, it's as complex as paying to offset carbon emissions and ferreting out new owners for the endless heaps of furniture, electronics, appliances, bicycles and odds and ends they're paid to cart away from apartments, offices and homes.

"When our clients started asking where this stuff is going, that provided

affirmation that this is the right thing to do," Frank says. "That prompted us to ask what else can we do to make our business Earth-friendly."

For one, the Coynes purchased a new truck with clean idling technology. Also, their pink trucks that brag "we smell better" feature eco-boxes that allow employees to simplify loads by separating recyclables from what's destined for the dump. In addition, they're considering powering their fleet with biofuel such as cooking grease from neighborhood restaurants.

"We are the place where the decision happens," Linden says. "We can either drop this stuff into a landfill, basically a hole in the ground, or find another place to put it."

Whenever possible, they choose the latter. For instance, computers and electronic peripherals go to First Time Computers on Georgia Avenue NW, building materials are bound for Community Forklift in Edmonston, and the Salvation Army is a catch-all for other goodies.

The Coynes have felt like year-round Santas since early 2003 when Frank launched the business as a sideline, using a pickup truck he inherited from his father. Junk in the Trunk became official later that year with an announcement on the Bloomingdale e-mail exchange. After furnishing and decorating their two-story home, they've done the same for friends, family and strangers.

Their philosophy is what keeps clients coming.

"I like everything about the way he does business," says Caroline Mindel, a customer since 2005. Mindel Management looks after 45 DC condominiums. "He's extremely helpful and reliable, and the fact that the business is green makes a really big difference."

Professional organizer Gretchen McCune gravitates toward Frank because his pleasant attitude and promptness remind her of her Midwestern roots.

"I hate to throw things away, but I have to have it out of the way," says McCune, who caters to clutter with her Bethesda-based business Order in the House. "I feel better spending my money on somebody who knows about recycling."

Both Mindel and McCune also agree that the price is right.

Junk in the Trunk charges \$600 for a full load. Frank agonized in February before raising the single-item rate from \$105 to \$114. But operating costs keep ballooning and the competition for market share is fierce.

Frank actually grew up in Oxon Hill, a long way from the Midwest. He was grinding out 12-plus hour days in the Fannie Mae Foundation communications department when he literally decided to trash that career and pursuit of an MBA.

Linden, a DC native, left full-time teaching in 2006 to join her husband as co-owner. Thus far it has been an exhilarating and daunting half-dozen years for the young couple – a marriage, a move, a business startup and the arrival of daughter, Nola, and son, Rocco.

With their business strategy more firmly jelled, the Coynes are optimistic about 2008. They're in the midst of moving the headquarters from DC to Silver Spring and doubling their truck count to six. As well, franchises across the Mid-Atlantic are a distinct possibility.

Pet projects they want to strengthen via local partnerships include: community compost piles, paint re-use programs, electronics recycling and block parties that encourage swapping.

Their eight to 10 employees – mostly artists, college students and entrepreneurs seeking flexibility – benefit from public transportation subsidies and earning pay while volunteering with nonprofit organizations.

In keeping with their pursuit of a smaller footprint, the Coynes have opted to use their trucks as billboards, eschewing posted signs that contribute to roadside litter. They've limited marketing materials to T-shirts and reusable shopping bags.

Linden knows her father would be tickled pink about her career change.

"My father was definitely a Dumpster-diver," she says with a smile about a man who left behind oodles of wood, doorknobs, salt and pepper shakers and other collectibles when he died. "When we were kids he'd always see something to rescue and tell us, 'Why don't you run over there and grab that out of the trash can?'"

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Frank and Linden Coyne and their baby, Rocco, in one of Junk in the Trunk's distinctive pink trucks.