

IN THE DEALER SPOTLIGHT:

Brenda's Vac Shop, Inc.

West Chester, PA



Brenda Powell works on one of her repair projects. Her interest in working with tools turned into a job at an appliance-repair shop. When she and her husband took over the business, which was established in 1937, repairing vacuums became their only business.

This Ms. Fix-It Is A Threat To Dust, Through Vacuums

By Sandy Bauers, Philadelphia Inquirer Staff Writer

Partway through the airing of a Phillies game on a local radio station, there is a break for an ad.

Brenda Powell has a question: "Does your vacuum suck?"

If it doesn't, she wants to have a look at it. She can fix it!

It's been nearly 25 years since she left her nursing job for the marvels of modern suction technology. Thousands of vacuum cleaners have succumbed to her determination and her simple delight in working with tools.

"I like to make things work right," Powell said, shrugging.

Finding her shop wouldn't be easy — she likes plants, so the display windows are a tangle of greenery and flowers instead of vacuum cleaners — except that it has

been in the same location on Market Street in downtown West Chester since 1939, so most people know it by now.

That was when Charles McCardle opened what was then an appliance repair shop. Powell doesn't think he did vacuums then. After all, vacuums had only been around since about 1907, when an American inventor sold his patent for a small electric cleaner to a harness maker named Hoover.

Over the years, other kinds of appliance repair declined — it became cheaper and easier to buy new — and McCardle began to work more and more on vacuums.

Powell, years later, was cleaning houses and working as a nursing assistant.

But she always harbored a love of tinkering. She even took two vo-tech courses, aiming to become an electrician's apprentice.

“I just wanted to work with tools,” she said.

Time passed. She started cleaning house for McCardle’s son. After she did a few simple repairs on their lamps and such — she’d discover they weren’t working and just fix them — McCardle’s son approached her.

His father was 65 and he needed help, the younger McCardle said. Was Powell interested?

She spent a few weekends in the shop. McCardle showed her a few motors. It was 1982.

Not long after, he had a special repair table built for her — just five feet tall; she needed a low one — and the two worked together for the next 18 years.

When McCardle finally retired, Powell and her husband, Ron, bought the business and renamed it Brenda’s Vac Shop.

Inside, Powell reigns over several rooms full of vacuums and parts that look almost like they belong in a museum.

A sturdy, no-nonsense woman of 51 who wears her hair in a bun, she walks down the aisles of small cardboard bins, still labeled in McCardle’s writing: Hoover handle spring lever. Eureka express neck. Hoover celebrity swivel hose.

She has parts they don’t even make any more, with “Charlie” to thank for that. Back when it took three weeks to get a part, “he’d order 10 or 20,” Powell says. So, a lot are still around.

There are wands, motors, cords, switches, wheels.

And bags! A woman in a pink sweater walks in the door. Powell nods and says by way of greeting: “Need some Z bags, do you?” The woman smiles.

Another section has rows of repaired uprights. “Little soldiers,” Powell calls them, “waiting to be picked up.”

And in the basement is “the graveyard” — a tumble of vacuums and parts. She saved them thinking she could rob a part or two from obsolete models.

“Charlie taught me,” she explains. “I still have that same mentality. I can fit it!”

But now she’s throwing them away. Too much stuff.

The showroom is virtually a chronological display of the history of vacuums.

At one end are the new Sebos and Mielees — “designed to capture and retain 99.97 percent of the tiny airborne particles that can harm growing lungs.”

(Any newcomers have to pass rigorous muster with Powell, who disdains some current models as “plastic pieces of junk” — the motors are designed to be thrown away instead of fixed.)

At the other is a contingent of older Electrolux canister

vacuums — creatures of the 40s and 50s. The oldest, vintage 1937, has a cylindrical metal casing and a \$75 price tag.

“They were made to last,” Powell insists.

She knows a vacuum’s various songs of distress — the whines, groans, and wheezes that signal a sock has been sucked into the motor, or a penny is lodged somewhere crucial.

“A lot of times, I’ll say, ‘You know, your vacuum’s not a trash compactor’.”

If customers who bring in wounded machines launch into accounts of what they think is wrong, she cuts them off. “I’ll figure it out,” Powell tells them.

Yes, there is a lot she’s figured out the last 20-some years. Apparently, you can tell a lot about a person by his or her vacuum.

And whether it sucks.

And what else it’s good for.

By Powell’s cash register is a small sign: “When your dreams turn to dust, vacuum.” ❖

Brenda’s Vac Shop is located at 142 E. Market St., West Chester, PA. Author Sandy Bauers can be contacted at sbauers@phillynews.com. Reprinted with permission from the Philadelphia Inquirer.