

offering more

Two savvy retailers team up to create Eastern Ontario's new go-to source for hearth, barbecue, and solar-energy solutions. **by SHARON SANDERS** photography by ERIC HEALEY

There are no boundaries, when it comes to the ways that a smart hearth retailer will innovate to serve its customers better. Canadian hearth retailer Friendly Fires (Ontario's leading supplier of fireplaces and barbecues) recently joined forces with Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow, Inc. (Ontario's leading supplier of pellet and solar solutions), to form the single largest fireplace, barbecue, and solar retail company in Eastern Ontario.

With three Ontario retail locations—in Kingston, Peterborough, and Cobourg—the two companies (now collectively known as Friendly Fires) have what they hope will be the focus and product offerings that are necessary to move forward, as a progressive retailer. Brad Leonard, partner in Friendly Fires, says, “We are setting ourselves up to appeal not only to today's consumers, but to the next generation as well.”

Both companies have grown up locally, over the past 20 years. Alex Soubliere of Friendly Fires has helped guide the hearth business' growth since its early beginnings. Leonard, who has a passion for the environment, became a partner in Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow in 1996.

“We have years of experience with the customers in our area, so we are in tune with what they may need, as the energy landscape grows and changes,” Leonard says. Along with its large team of experts, the new



Friendly Fires is prepared to advise customers on the best ways to warm their homes, save on heating expenses, and find the right energy solutions.

Friendly Fires has built a strong reputation, over the years, as a retailer that cares about the community and the environment. It specializes in high-end gas, wood, and pellet fireplaces, inserts, and stoves, as well as barbecues.

GROWING OPPORTUNITIES

Leonard explains that the combined business has created a dynamic on the sales floor that naturally opens up conversations about efficiency. People see the hearth and solar products and ask about the connection. “There is no doubt that we are a little bit differ-

Top: Brad Leonard

Middle: Hearth, barbecue, and solar offerings form a combination that works

Bottom: The hearth selection at Friendly Fires emphasizes efficiency

ent from the average mom-and-pop shop. We bring a fresh perspective when we are showing customers their options," Leonard explains.

The company now offers both solar hot-water and solar electric solutions. Its residential solar hot-water systems use rooftop solar panels to transfer the sun's heat to household water. According to Leonard, solar energy has the potential to cut a homeowner's hot-water costs by 50%, helping homeowners save money and reduce their impact on the environment at the same time.

"One-fifth of a home's utility bill comes from heating water, so it makes sense to find a way to do it in the most efficient and cost-effective way possible," he adds. The company also offers solar pool hot-water systems that can be used as stand-alone units or installed in combination with (or in addition to) an existing hot-water pool system. It's an economical option that helps extend pool-use time earlier and later in the season.

According to Leonard, solar elec-

tric solutions are a craze in Canada, as the government is offering incentives to encourage people to use solar energy. Friendly Fires sells solar off-grid solutions that are geared to homeowners who are not interested in (or cannot be connected to) Ontario's hydroelectric network. An off-grid solution allows a homeowner to be energy independent—and to save money on electric costs as well.

The solar-power system works using solar panels that don't require the use of generators. The off-grid systems are configured and installed specifically to meet the needs of each individual homeowner.

Leonard (who is an active member of the Canadian Solar Industries Association) sees a strong future for solar energy, as it becomes more widely accepted.

"When Plum Hollow got into solar energy, 15 to 20 years ago, it was a fringe industry. People may think it is fringe now, but it was superfringe back then," he says, adding that his passion for it continues to grow. He says, "There is



profit in it now that wasn't there before, which tells me we are on the right track."

BETTER BUSINESS

The merging of the two businesses has also given Friendly Fires the opportunity to innovate in the way that it operates. Leonard and Soubliere have brought together their individual ideas and experiences to create a forward-looking organization. The duo has fine-tuned its internal processes, sales training, and other training programs and has encapsulated them in what it calls cookbooks: living, breathing documents.

"We have spent a lot of time and energy documenting our progress and processes, so we have a clear path for everyone in our organization to follow. It also gives us clarity, so we can learn from our mistakes," Leonard explains. He is inspired by a quote often attributed to Albert Einstein (1879–1955): Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different

results. That inspiration has created the motivation never to stop modifying the business, so it stays fresh and relevant.

Friendly Fires has a refreshing optimism for the future and is eager to see the new technologies and advances that are yet to emerge in the hearth industry. "Baby boomers may be our primary customers right now, but it won't be long before the next generation—people in their 20s and 30s—will be shopping our stores. We want to have products that appeal to them and fit into their lifestyles," Leonard explains, adding that he feels that they will probably be seeking products that are convenient and easy to operate.

He says, "Younger people are growing up with smartphone apps and technologies that make things happen instantly, at the touch of a finger—so that is what they will expect from all of their consumer products. Friendly Fires plans to be the retailer that does business and offers solutions that are the perfect fit." ■



Friendly Fires

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