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This son will do your chores

Amy Wu
Staff writer

(May 8, 2006) — Ralph Ercolano's job description morphs from one minute to the next. As the owner of a one-man business named Surrogate Son, Ercolano is in the business of helping people get things done.

For \$25 an hour, he'll do almost anything around the house — odd repair jobs, concierge services, cooking, running errands, sorting mail and cleaning closets.

Ercolano says it comes down to this: "If time allows, I will do it. I'm the guy people will call when they need a nice, trustworthy fellow to do something for them."

In the five months since this former financial adviser, tailor and concierge launched his business, the 57-year-old Penfield resident has gained nearly a dozen steady clients. Most are acquaintances or people who heard about him through word of mouth.

In recent weeks, he served as a middleman between a family and contractors, tackled a family's messy garage, washed windows and put together estimates for home improvement projects.

Why would anyone want to do this stuff?

Ercolano says that in his last job as a concierge at an upscale eye-care store, he saw a growing need for his services, especially with the rising number of dual-income families.

"It seemed like there were people out there who needed help with everyday tasks. I mean, how annoying is it when you listen to the stopper on your toilet leak in the middle of the night?" he said.

Ercolano majored in sociology at St. John Fisher College and has had nine different jobs in a variety of industries. He says he follows his passion because life is too short, and he has always been able to make a living with each move.

After he was diagnosed with hairy cell leukemia 11 years ago, he decided to focus only on jobs that interested him.

"Now what's really important is family, friends, being with people you like. Everything else is necessary but not important," said Ercolano, father of two grown children.

He has gotten rid of the cancer but kept the outlook.

When financial services got stale, he became a concierge and then came up with the idea for Surrogate Son. Being his own boss also gives him more control of his time.

As with any small business, it is a risk. Ercolano is dipping into his retirement savings.

But he said, "I think I am onto something."

Already there are similar businesses sprouting up locally. "There are a lot of people who would rather be doing other things than taking care of this massive to-do list," said Michelle Graves, who opened Errand Assistants in Henrietta this year.

But clients like that Surrogate Son is a one-stop shop. "You'd have to call three to four different people to do what he does," said repeat customer Vincent DiGiorgio, president of Brighton's Europa Custom Tailors, where Ercolano previously worked as operations manager.

Ercolano does set limits. He won't baby-sit, since certification is required, and he turned down the opportunity to power wash a two-story home.

Yet most everyday tasks are on the table. He moved a television and a bookshelf for Mary Lynn Vickers, a personal chef.

It didn't take much time, so like any business person trying to cultivate repeat customers, Ercolano forfeited some money now in the hope of a bigger job later. He told Vickers the time it took didn't warrant payment.

"In order for me to charge someone for the work, I have to do some work," he said. But he did accept a pan of brownies.

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HEATHER CHARLES staff photographer

Ralph Ercolano of Surrogate Son moves a shelf for Mary Lynn Vickers at her home in Webster. Ercolano charges \$25 an hour to do various household chores and errands for clients who are too busy to do the work themselves.

Day in Photos

Tips

Ralph Ercolano offers tips for people who want to try something new in their careers and lives.

- ✦ With no regard for any societal limits, decide what you really would like to do.
- ✦ Determine the costs involved in the change you want to make. Ask yourself if you can afford these costs.
- ✦ After making a decision, tackle the change with every fiber of your being.

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