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After his experience, PSL man says this bed's for you

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

An aching back with no cure propelled a Port St. Lucie insurance salesman to start a business.

Duncan Macquarrie, 49, designed the Fijibed, which uses infrared heat treatments and heat-conducting, pivoting jade rollers to produce a mechanical massage.

Macquarrie developed sciatica in 2003. The condition often is caused by a herniated disk in the lumbar region of the spine. The pain radiates to the buttocks and to the back of the thigh. When visits to a hospital emergency room and to chiropractors brought no long-term relief, Macquarrie tried a Migun bed, which offers infrared heat and a mechanical deep-tissue massage, but uses fixed balls.

"I could not stand the pain of the first treatment," Macquarrie said.

Though he was told future sessions would take away the pain, Macquarrie began looking for another bed. He had experience importing products from the Asia as the founder of Savannah Trading Co. in 1997. As a nationally certified minority business (Macquarrie's mother was Cuban), Savannah became a vendor to Wal-Mart, providing the chain with underwater diving lights.

"I was probably the smallest vendor in Wal-Mart," says Macquarrie, a Fort Pierce native and graduate of John Carroll High School and Florida Atlantic University.

He found what he was looking for on a trip to Korea: an infrared bed not sold in the United States because it uses 220 volts, rather than the standard 110 volts. He also noticed that Korea mainly was an assembly point. The bed was made in China.

His odyssey for a cure took him to Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, where he found a large manufacturer of massage chairs, commonly found in this country at specialty stores. Company executives agreed to make his bed.

An old friend, electrical engineer Ken Hoffman of Palm City, converted the bed from 220 to 110 volts. Although not a designer, Macquarrie set about remaking the product. He wanted to replace

the hard knobs of the other bed he had tried with jade rollers to offer a more gentle massage.

He also changed the color from a choice of black or silver to tan.

"I wanted it to look like a nice piece of furniture," Duncan says.

"It's more a therapeutic massage than a medical treatment and so is more suited to a spa-type setting."

With the design changes completed, manufacturing began late last year.

The Chinese company, which he declined to name for competitive reasons, made 10 beds to start. They quickly sold at a trade show in Kissimmee.

Macquarrie, his girlfriend, Lou Ann Ellison, Hoffman and his wife, Janet, began making the trade show circuit together, concentrating on massage therapists and chiropractors. They've sold 50 beds thus far, at a price of \$2,195 each.

Macquarrie says his Chinese manufacturer could make 300 beds a month and could ramp up further if there's demand. He has a small warehouse in Palm City that can hold about 100 beds.

To help sell the bed, Macquarrie has lined up eight distributors and is looking for more. Included are catalog firms in North Carolina and Arkansas, five small businesses in Orlando, Fort Myers and Plantation, and Port St. Lucie-based Remetronix, a medical equipment transportation and installation firm which is adding Fijibed to its list of supplies.

The Martin County distributor is Linda Houston, owner of Too Social Butterflies, a downtown Jensen Beach restaurant with an eclectic array of other products and services, including an oxygen bar, sauna, tanning, massage, art, jewelry and an Internet cafe.

Houston offers 10-minute free sessions to display the Fijibed. The product draws a lot of interest on Thursday nights when the weekly Jammin' Jensen promotion brings hundreds to the downtown area.

Palm City resident Ed Ruane, who calls himself "more than 65," liked the bed so much that he brought wife, Joanna, back on a recent Thursday evening to get her impression.

"I'm in ecstasy, it's fantastic," she said. "It massages all the way down to my feet."

"It's revolutionary," Ed Ruane said. "I really like that both heat and pressure can be adjusted."

Barbara Lucera, 55, of Jensen Beach, gets regular massages for her back pain, but liked the Fijibed.

"It's almost as good as a human massage," Lucero said.

The bed doesn't appeal only to the older demographic. Cody Ball, a 17-year-old Jensen Beach High School senior, also praised the neck-to-ankles massage.

"It's very comfortable and the rollers don't hurt at all," Ball said.

"It's awesome."

Shop owner Houston, who had herniated discs in her neck, swears by the product.

"Infrared penetrates with radiant heat 1.5 inches into the body, providing a persistent effect," Houston said.

Macquarrie claims the Fijibed offers the combined therapeutic benefits of acupressure, chiropractic, massage and far-infrared heat. That relieves stress and tension in the muscles, improves blood circulation and increases energy.

Chiropractors use infrared radiation to prepare people for chiropractic treatment. It's not for use by pregnant women or people with metal pins from previous surgeries, however.

Macquarrie scoffs at the Korean Ceragem bed gaining some popularity in the South Florida Hispanic community, saying it's very low quality.

"The frame is like lawn furniture, the bed is too short for most Americans, and most importantly, the rollers are fixed, causing pain and an inferior massage experience," Macquarrie says. "Our rollers pivot to follow your spine."

Macquarrie says his biggest challenge is raising awareness of the bed.

He continues to work full time as a salesman for Affirmative Insurance Group's Stuart office as it builds sales and distribution.

"The product is new to the United States. People are not familiar with it," he says. "But I believe in this product 100 percent because I know it can help people."

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