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A new business in aging society

Kevin Petrill sees new life for industry based on elder care

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WAXHAW

Kevin Petrill used to build houses.

He liked building houses and had been doing it since 1982, but last year, he realized he was going to have to do something else if he wanted to keep his finances above water.

After looking at different franchise possibilities, "something else" turned out to be Home Helpers, an in-home care program for those who require a little extra day-to-day help.

While his former business was flooded with product, too many houses and not enough buyers, Petrill said his new business should be flush with customers. He said that by 2011, there would be 10,000 people turning 65 every day. He acknowledged that elderly clients typically do not turn to home help until their late-70s, but that the population was clearly aging and there would be a need for the service he is providing in that market. He added that the elderly population was not his only client base, citing new or expecting mothers or those with physical handicaps who can benefit from the service as well.

Petrill and his wife, Laurie Petrill, whom he calls "the brains of the business", will run Home Helpers together; they landed on that line of work partly for personal reasons. His parents live in Pennsylvania and hers live in Georgia, no short distance should either of them need a helping hand.

The Petrills realized that there was a growing trend of families moving

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away from each other so the immediate line of help could be several hundred miles away. That's where Home Helpers steps in.

An employee of the company — Home Helpers does not sub-contract — will be on a weekly schedule to stop by a client's home to help with basic needs around the house.

They do not do medical work, though Petrill said most of his employees are nursing students and there is a registered nurse on staff.

The main responsibilities are to help with chores and to be a companion.

"When you know you are helping others, that's the real benefit," Petrill said.

The Petrills are not yet completely up and running.

They have been completing paperwork and getting everything lined up since October, but hope to be certified in early May, at which point they may take on clients. Petrill said they already have 10 employees lined up who will work on a mostly part-time basis.

While the Petrills have sought alternate sources of income to cope with the economy, the Union County Chamber of Commerce reports few others are.

"Most people are just trying to ride it out," chamber President Jim

Carpenter said.

Chamber Chairman Ron Sumrow added that, even though some members have decided not to renew with the chamber, new businesses are coming on, keeping total membership about even.

"It's that leaky bucket theory," he said. As long as new members join at the same rate as others leave, the chamber will stay on an even keel.

Petrill said he still has three new houses on the market and has not ruled out returning to the construction field, but is focused on Home Helpers for now and hopes to grow out of his home office to a commercial space.

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