

YOU CAN'T STOP PROGRESS

An Interview with America's Most Progressive Self-Service Laundry Owners

Laury Rosario is an arthropathic physician, who also teaches alternative education. She boasts a bachelor's degree in biochemistry and a doctorate from the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut.

Her cousin, Jesus Ortiz, is a former Marine with a background as a corrections officer. For the past eight years, he has run his own tree removal and home improvement businesses.

Last summer, they added one more major professional responsibility to their resumes—self-service laundry owner. The two opened the 2,400-square-foot Spin Cycle Café Laundromat, a combination self-service laundry and sandwich shop, located in Newington, Conn.

And, just recently, all of their hard work paid off, as the Coin Laundry Association named the Spin Cycle Café Laundromat the winner of the organization's second annual America's Most Progressive Laundry contest.

What does the term “progress” mean to you?

Jesus Ortiz: It means continually

growing and covering a lot of avenues. I hear “progressive,” and I think innovative.

Laury Rosario: It means thinking outside the box, not running just a typical store.

What does that term mean to you in terms of running your new laundry business?

Laury: It means changing the misconceptions of doing laundry in a laundromat. It means upgrading the old perceptions and images of a laundromat.

When you set out to create Spin Cycle Café Laundromat, did you envision creating a progressive store? Was that all part of the business plan?

Jesus: Being progressive was in our plans. We knew we were going to bring something different, something new, to the table. We had a lot of people who supported us and our concept, but there were also a lot of people who just weren't convinced—

you could hear it in their voices and see it in their eyes. They didn't think it was going to work.

But, yes, being a progressive store was definitely in the plans from the beginning.

What are some of the most modern or progressive aspects of your laundry?

Laury: One of the very first progressive concepts is simply the design of the building itself. It's not your typical laundry design. It features a very geometric, very futuristic type of look and shape.

In addition, when you enter the building everything blends perfectly. We have an industrial touch, but it blends well with the wood accents and the entire atmosphere and feel that we've created here at Spin Cycle.

Of course, another aspect that makes us more progressive than any other type of business, especially a laundromat, is the fact that we provide live entertainment, from comedy to music.

We're breaking the mold that is associated with coin laundries. A lot of our customers who come in the first time are hooked simply because it is a beautiful place. It's homey. They feel safe. And, at the same time, they can do many other different types of things here, while they're doing their laundry.

And, of course, we even have people who come in specifically for the food in our café.

I would imagine you probably have a completely separate customer base of specifically "café customers."

Laury: Exactly.

Do you cross-promote between your laundry and café customers?

Laury: We do. We do so with our menu, and also with all of the services we provide. This touches on several types of clienteles, whether they only want to eat, or also do their laundry, or take advantage of our drycleaning or wash-dry-fold services. We cater to everyone.

You both come to the laundry industry from much different professional backgrounds. How did you get involved in this business? What attracted you?

Laury: It was a business that Jesus had seen down South, while in the Marines, stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. There was a laundromat with a bar attached, and he realized that the place was making a lot of money—although it wasn't exactly the type of business he had envisioned for himself.

This place in North Carolina was bringing together the military personnel and university students in town. People would travel quite a ways to get there. It was a popular hangout.

Later, he brought that idea to me.

We discussed it, and I said that I didn't really care to open a bar, but we were both interested in a café. So we started to elaborate on that idea, and it just grew from there.

The chemistry that Jesus and I share is so beautiful in a sense that I'm a big-picture person and he's more detail-oriented. However, we've sat down and agreed on every single detail under this roof.

How did your professional backgrounds prepare you for life as progressive laundry owners?

Laury: I think the fact that we weren't previously involved in the coin laundry business was to our advantage. We came to it with open minds and open hearts. It was a clean slate. We didn't have anyone to follow as a foundation or any set "traditions" to maintain, as we might have had we grown up in the laundry business.



Seeing as we had no idea how to run a laundromat and no background in it, I think that was a blessing in itself. We were able to develop and create something unique.

In your opinion, what are the keys to being a successful laundry owner?

Laury: I think one of the keys for us was the fact that we didn't commit some of the mistakes that a lot of laundry owners make early on. We did extensive homework on the types of machines we wanted—how efficient they were, what brand to choose, what water-heating system to choose.

For example, we have instant water heaters, versus the traditional hot water tanks. This, in itself, is saving us loads of money, just on that particular system.

There are several aspects that we took time to research and, because of that, we're saving more money than most laundromats.



If we had gone the traditional route, our biggest obstacle would have been maintaining our overhead. But that's not the case.

Another key is advertising—and having the working capital to advertise and to get our name out there. Our business concept is solid. When people walk in, they're hooked.

Do you have a business philosophy that guides your decisions with this new business venture of yours?

Laury: We do. What we've created here is where we would want to be, where we would feel comfortable. We treat our customers the way we would want to be treated, and Jesus and I share the same school of thought when it comes to that.

Another thing is consistency, between his shift and my shift. That's very important to us, to maintain consistency. Maintaining a clean facility is very important as well.

Plus, we really take customer suggestions and any new ideas into consideration. We're open to them. We have an open mind to this whole business. I think that's probably why we've been chosen as the most progressive laundry in America.

What's the biggest issue facing today's laundry owners?

Laury: I think the biggest issue is overhead, certainly including utilities. That and waiting out the initial months or years that it takes to clear a profit. Honestly, that's probably the most difficult issue in any business.

What are your thoughts on vend pricing?

Laury: We fall in a special niche of laundromats to where we really don't have any "competitors," because we're not only a laundromat. Spin Cycle is two businesses that attract a whole spectrum of people and interests.

But, if we were to compare apples to apples, our vend pricing falls about mid-range, compared to most laundromats.

One thing I haven't done and that I would definitely want to do in the future is find out exactly how utilities are being consumed per machine per use so that I could have a clear breakdown as to what our profit margin is based on that.

We decided to price our machines based on what we saw in the marketplace. We took an average and then took into consideration all of the amenities that we provide, such as WiFi, the entertainment, the large-screen televisions, the lounge area and so on. We took all of that into consideration and figured out what we thought was a fair price to charge for our machines.

You have no attendants, correct?

Laury: That's Right. It's just mainly Jesus and I.



What are your store hours?

Laury: We're open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., and on the weekends from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

What is your favorite aspect of this business?

Laury: I like the interaction with all of the different customers that we meet, for all walks of life. Although we thought that our client demographics were going to come from a certain age group, it has turned out that everyone, all age groups, are attracted to this place—from seniors in the morning with the coffee and the pastries all the way to the college students that come in mid-day for lunch and then in the afternoon to watch TV, hang out and do their wash. It really ranges. We've got soccer moms and single dads. It's amazing.

And we offer "laundromat dating" on Tuesday nights, so we get all kinds of people in here. I love that. I love the interaction between them.

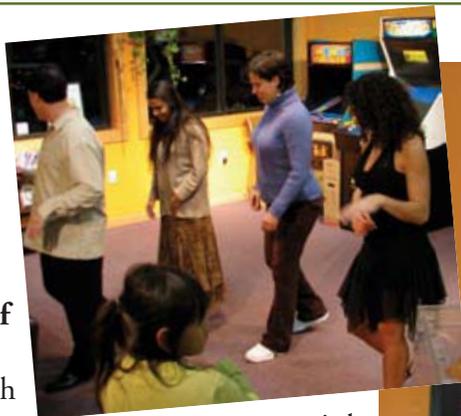
In fact, laundries have been stereotyped as these cold, standoffish places where customers don't mingle or start conversations out of the blue. But you don't see that here. Our customers start talking to one another, perfect strangers. It's such a homey feeling in our store that they feel comfortable doing it.

What are some common business mistakes that you've seen laundry owners make?

Jesus: A lack of cleanliness. A lot of coin laundries are dirty. There is just a lack of attention to the business on the part of the owners.

What's the biggest mistake that you've made in this business?

Laury: We should have moved faster



with the whole process of getting the business opened. There are things we learned now that we could have done then. We could have sped up the entire process a lot more than we did.

How long was the process?

Laury: Two and a half years. We're the first café/laundromat in Connecticut, and as such, there are things we could have implemented or pushed along with the state to at least find out what we had to do to implement some type of guidelines and regulations more quickly than it actually happened.

The state didn't know what to do with us. Yes, both types of business exist separately in this state, but never together. Therefore, they didn't know if there were any regulations that should be made. Should there be a physical partition between the two? How should the water systems drain?

There were so many things up in the air, and the state didn't know how to tackle it because there was no precedent for it. As a result, the whole process took far too long. There were a lot of things we could have done to speed it up, but we didn't know any better.

What's in store for the future?

Laury: We don't see a franchise, but we certainly envision multiple locations. In five years, we'd like to



have 10 locations open. We'd like to saturate the market as much as we can, because we're tailoring it to the colleges. We're literally four minutes away from Central Connecticut State University.

In general, what does the future of the self-service laundry industry look like? As America's most progressive coin laundry owners, what do you envision?

Laury: I see a conversion, where we eliminate the use of coins altogether. Plus, I see laundry owners making their stores more friendly and inviting to their customers. I can see many more locations such as ours—perhaps not to the extreme that we're taking it, but certainly something that's catering to different avenues of atmosphere.

Why is being progressive so crucial to this industry as a whole?

Laury: As with any business, you have to keep up with the times. Otherwise, you get left behind. You still have to implement and maintain traditional concepts, but at the same time, you have to move along.

For instance, the use of computers is a perfect example. We can try our hardest to avoid using one, but

everything is so dependent upon the use of computers today that if you don't learn, you will fall by the wayside. This is true with any type of business.

What's the best advice you would give a new store owner?

Laury: Do your homework prior to investing any type of money, from the beginning. We rented the location and then found out what it was that a laundromat entailed. I would suggest reversing that scenario.

Discover for yourself if it's something that you personally can do, without the help of employees, because you have to have the discipline to involve yourself in the business.

For us, we don't have the luxury to hire help. I'm a doctor, yes. But I still have to wash people's laundry. I have to make a sandwich. There are things you have to be willing to do on a personal level to make a laundry business succeed.

Also, don't be afraid to take chances. We've taken some huge ones.

Lastly, you have to believe in your heart in what you are doing. Otherwise, you're not going to succeed.



EQUIPMENT MIX

Spin Cycle Café Laundromat • Newington, Conn.

- 5 Speed Queen toploaders\$1.75
- 6 Dexter double load frontloaders\$3
- 7 Dexter triple load frontloaders\$4
- 5 Dexter Maxi 4 Load frontloaders\$5.75
- 2 Dexter Mega 5 Load frontloaders\$6.75
- 24 Dexter 30-pound dryers\$1/first 24 min., 25¢/additional 6 min.
- 6 Rheem Instant Water Heaters
- 15 seats in the café, plus small patio tables
- Commercial-grade epoxy flooring in the laundry, and a combination of laminate flooring/carpeting in the café.
- A full café menu including paninis, melts, salads, pastries and beverages
- 3 arcade-style video games
- 2 flatscreen, high-definition TVs (32- and 42-inch screen)
- Wi-Fi access
- Entertainment, including comedy, "open mic" nights, karaoke, laundromat dating, dance lessons and more
- Senior discounts
- Children's book readings on Saturday mornings
- Wash-dry-fold service . . . \$13.50/10-pound min.; 75¢/pound for additional laundry beyond 10 pounds
- Drop-off drycleaning

