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Business brings custom feeling to garages

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VENICE -- Jess Fronckowiak was 8 years old when he left the frigid winters of Buffalo, N.Y., for the endless Florida summer, and right away he noticed a difference between the homes of the North and those of the South.

Where were the basements?

Fronckowiak, now 30, makes his living answering that question. His Venice-based company, J2 Solutions, sells and designs custom-built, free-standing garages called "Florida Basements."

A defector from Southwest Florida's custom home-building market, Fronckowiak couches his product as the solution for Florida transplants who have a lifetime of possessions and nowhere to put them. The garages range in price from about \$45 to \$65 per square foot, with a total cost that ranges from \$20,000 to more than \$100,000.

Despite an area-wide slowdown in home sales, Fronckowiak says the garage business is "smoking" and provides numbers to back up the claim. He has sold more than 60 of the structures since opening in 2002 and he has already sold more in 2006 than all of 2005.

Fronckowiak speculated that the high cost of homes in Southwest Florida could prompt more residents to augment their houses rather than buy new ones.

"You can't move anywhere. Where are you going to go? You reinvent your own home," he said. "The whole garage-building industry is going nuts. We're kind of capitalizing on that."

Fronckowiak opened his business, which includes just two other employees, in 2002 as a custom home builder. He found it difficult to compete in Sarasota County's tough home-building market and shifted J2 Solution's focus to stand-alone garages last year.

J2 Solutions still designs some homes, but 95 percent of the company's work is concentrated in garages, Fronckowiak said. Last year, 21

garages sold for about \$500,000 total, and 24 were sold this year through July.

Fronckowiak said he realized that detached, customized garages were profitable during the company's first construction job when neighbors started asking: "How much do these things cost?"

"Then the light went off: It's the same reoccurring problem -- people don't have enough room," he said.

J2 Solutions' main competition is from mini-storage companies, Fronckowiak said. Shed companies seek a different buyer because Florida Basements are larger and built to suit the needs of each buyer.

Fronckowiak starts every job by making sure the property is large enough for a garage and then walks the buyer through different design options. Some buyers want "a small garage with a lot of bells and whistles" and some prefer "a large big box," he said.

A day after the buyer settles on specifications, Fronckowiak provides a price.

Building, performed by subcontractors, takes about 90 days. The whole process, including permitting, takes about six months. Permitting is much stricter -- and more time-consuming -- for attached garages, he said.

J2 Solutions' first customer, Bill Schafer of Venice, inadvertently gave Fronckowiak the idea for his business.

Four years ago, Schafer hired Fronckowiak to build a custom home a mile and a half from Manasota Key. Schafer, a retired General Electric worker with a passion for hot rods, also wanted a place to work on his prized cars: a 1927 Model T and a 1932 Ford Roadster.

Schafer reasoned that a detached building would be safer than an addition.

"There's always a fire danger and I don't want



Jess Fronckowiak, owner of J2 Solutions, stands in the first custom garage he built, back in 2003. So far this year, he's sold 24 garages.

everything going up if I could help it," Schafer said.

Today, Schafer's 900-square-foot, \$30,000 garage looks like a miniature classic car museum, with the two ancient autos next to a wall of more than three dozen trophies and plaques from car shows.

Schafer's wife, Mary, said the addition helps offset their home's lack of a basement.

"Up north, everyone has a basement. You need a lot of space," she said.

Fronckowiak said much of his business comes from Northerners who are used to homes with basements and attics. He is a Northerner himself, having moved to Venice from Buffalo in 1985 with his family.

"Dad was a builder," he said.

He has lived and worked in Florida since the move.

After he earned a degree in civil engineering from the University of Florida in 2000, Fronckowiak took a heavy construction job with the Murray Co. in Tampa. He stayed with the firm just long enough to qualify for the contractor's exam and then opened his business.

His Venice home does not include a Florida Basement. A little blue bird is to blame.

Fronckowiak owned land in Englewood and planned to build a garage, but then "a little scrub jay moved into my property." He ended up buying a home in Venice Gardens that did not have enough room for a garage.

All the more reason to put care into the garages he builds for other people.

"For most contractors, garages are just four walls and 'Thank you, can I have my check?'" he said. "The reality is every customer wants something different, so every job is done custom."-