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Man's love of birds leads to opening of Wild Birds Unlimited franchise in Clearwater



Piper Castillo, Times Staff Writer

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CLEARWATER — Carl Albritton remembers when he gave his heart to the birds. It was in Connecticut, almost 50 years ago.

"I was 8 and a row of sparrows were sitting wing tip to wing tip on a telephone line. I threw a rock at the birds and wouldn't you know, I hit one," said Albritton, 56. "I wanted to wish it back alive."

As decades went by — years filled with raising a family and a successful career with AT&T — Albritton never forgot that sparrow.

"I remember being surprised by the warmth of it in my hands. That experience gave me a sense of responsibility," he said.

Albritton, who retired from AT&T last fall, now has turned his passion for birds into a business. Last week he and his wife, Karen, opened their Wild Birds Unlimited franchise on McMullen-Booth Road at Enterprise Road.

Wild Birds Unlimited is a corporation based in Indiana that specializes in all things related to backyard bird feeding and has about 275 locations nationwide. The Albrittons' store is the first in Pinellas County.

Albritton doesn't expect to make a lot of money in his new career — his salary will be about half what it was at AT&T, he estimates. But the chance to own a business while caring for nature was too good to pass up.



"I saw my first WBU about 20 years ago when I took my mother to buy birdseed," he said. "It was in a row house in Belleville, Ill. I thought it was great, and over the years my wife and I kept talking about it. We knew that this is how we wanted to end."

As customers enter the store inside the Northwood Commons Shopping Center, they are greeted by the sounds of songbirds floating from the stereo as well as the scent of wooden birdhouses.

If they walk to the back of the store, which Albritton encourages, they'll step onto an observation deck where they can study two feeding stations next to the shopping center's best-kept secret — a small, babbling creek. Under shade trees, the Albrittons have displayed a variety of feeders atop pole systems, equipped with squirrel baffles to prevent the critters from eating the birdseed.

Albritton has already seen many birds at the feeders, including tufted titmice, bluejays, woodpeckers, cardinals and mourning doves. He has also identified two hawks in the trees. "The reason we are here in this location is because we could make this bird habitat to go with the store," said Albritton.

Although the corporation has created two dozen blends of seed for franchises to sell, store owners select products designed for their region of the country. Right now, Albritton's shelves include about six different blends of seed focusing on the southeast region, including the popular "no-mess blend" for common songbirds. It's made up of sunflower chips, hulled white millet and shelled peanuts, items whose shells have been removed so only the meat of the seed is left. There's also safflower seed, a bitter seed savored by birds but disdained by those pesky squirrels.

When the weather changes, Albritton's selection will change too. "We'll think about the birds who transition this area," he said. "For example, goldfinches love black niger. That bird is very popular here, when it is cooler, but black niger is sensitive to humidity so selling it now just doesn't make sense," he said.

Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon Florida in Tallahassee, was pleased to hear of the store opening. "It's a terrific organization," he said. "The Tallahassee store opened about 10 years ago and it has been very successful. When you think about it, birdwatching is one of the most popular ways for people to get outdoors."

Palm Harbor conservation advocate Barb Walker also believes the store will be successful, but she wants consumers to remember that having bird feeders is a "complicated venture."

"You have to keep them clean, position them appropriately and use the right seeds. Keeping them clean is important so that disease isn't spread, which can harm a population," Walker said.

She also stresses the value in native landscaping, Florida-friendly plants for birds to enjoy, including firebush, wild coffee, sparkleberry and yaupon holly.

Albritton's approach to his job meshes well with Walker's concerns.

"We want to teach that there are four things necessary to attract birds — food, water, cover and a safe place to rear young," he said.

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Wild Birds Unlimited Nature Shop

Northwood Commons Shopping Center, 2454 N McMullen-Booth Road, Suite 101, Clearwater.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday; noon to 4 p.m. Sunday.

The business focuses on backyard bird feeding, selling items such as seed mixes, feeders, bird baths, gift items and reference materials. Birdseed in 20-pound bags ranges from \$28.99 for "Deluxe Blend" to \$48.99 for "No Mess Plus."

For more information, visit wbu.com/safetyharbor or call (727) 474-3768.

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