

From nuts and bolts to total solar packages

SOLAR LIVING INC.

TYPE OF BUSINESS: Sales and installation of solar energy products for heating of hot water, swimming pools and generation of electricity.

PRINCIPALS: Richard Bonte, president; Ethan Horvitz and Mike Mazzeo, vice presidents

ADDRESS: 432 Sand Shore Road, No. 5, Mt. Olive (Budd Lake section, Hackettstown mailing address)

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HOURS OF OPERATION: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and by appointment for showroom

FOUNDED: November 1977

Why did you start the business?

Rich Bonte: After the first energy crisis in 1973, I started getting interested in energy conservation. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter gave his famous energy speech, which motivated me to build my own solar hot-water heater. Then a few friends asked for units, and next thing I knew, I was in the solar-energy business.

By then end of the first

round of solar tax credits in 1985, I had installed more than 400 solar hot-water systems. Today, we have installed more than 2,000 solar thermal systems for heating hot water and swimming pools and more than 50 systems for solar electricity. I believe that we are the longest continuously operating solar energy business under the same name in New Jersey and have the largest number of total installations.

If you could do it again, what would you do differently?

For the first seven years, I worked at this part-time. I now realize that I should have quit my full-time job earlier and concentrated my efforts 100 percent on this business.

What's the best business advice you have ever received?

Stay focused on what you do, find your niche, and don't worry about your competition. If you concentrate on doing your best for the customer all the rest will fall into place. Worrying about your competition will only distract you.

What personality trait helps you the most?

Work-driven, striving

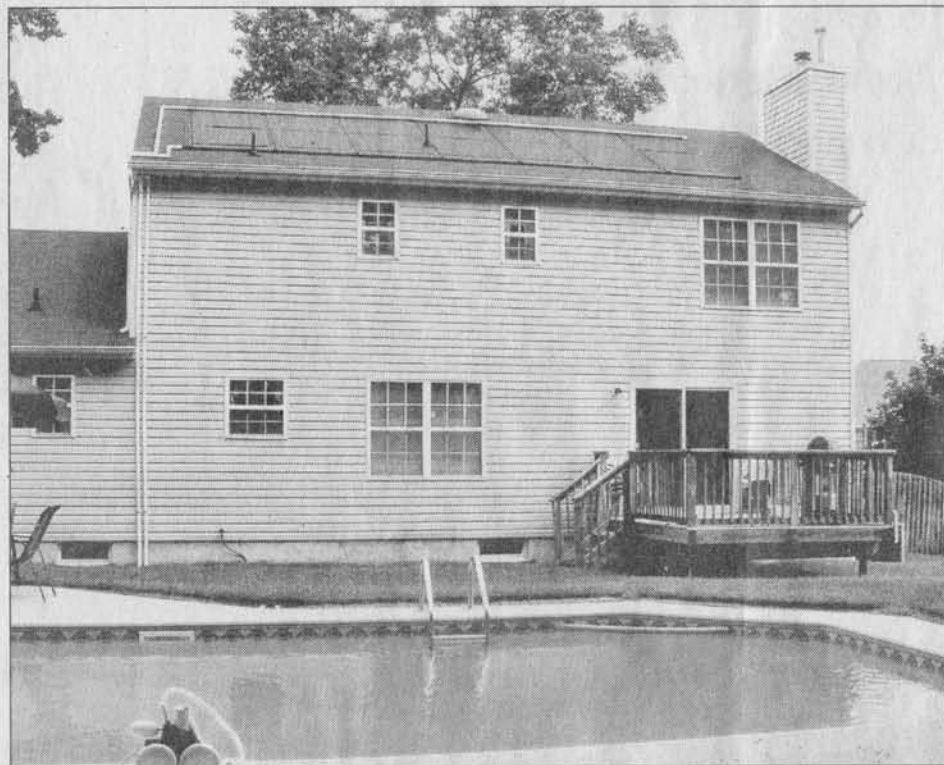


Photo courtesy of Solar Living Inc.

Solar Living Inc. in Budd Lake installed this rooftop solar-power system to heat the home's backyard pool.

for the best at a reasonable price.

What's the most challenging part of the job?

Probably the administrative end of requirements for obtaining municipal permits and the paperwork involved.

The easiest?

The actual installation of the solar-energy system.

What's your least expensive product or service?

Unfortunately, none. We carry more than 800 items related to solar-energy installations and products, but usually more than one item is needed unless

someone is just looking for a part. Literally, I could say screws and bolts are the least expensive items we sell.

The most expensive?

Some of our solar storage tanks, which can cost over \$2,000. In practical terms, our solar pool-heat-

ing systems range from \$2,000 to \$6,000, solar hot water from \$6,500 to \$9,000, and solar electric from \$20,000 to \$100,000.

Describe your most unusual customer, job or work experience.

We put in a solar pool-heating system so the (customer's) dogs could be comfortable. We installed a solar watering heating system for a church in Fairlawn to heat a walk in baptismal tank, and many of our Jewish customers install these systems for religious reasons.

When you leave the business, what will you do?

I can't imagine not being involved in some aspect of this business. Life is to live and help others, and this is how I feel I am accomplishing that goal.

In one sentence, tell us why customers should shop here.

We may not have the best prices, but I believe we have the best-quality products you will find in this industry and can back that up with over 34 years of experience.

Do you have a business in Mount Olive that you would like us to feature? Contact business editor William Westhoven at 973-428-6650.