

Strange Bedfellows

Local exterminator rediscovers an old pest

By **AMBROSE CLANCY**

What Steve Free originally thought were withdrawal symptoms turned out to be the first signs of an epidemic.

Owner of The Bug Stops Here, a Bohemia-based pest control businesses, Free was on a call five years ago at a Lake Grove alcohol and drug rehabilitation home. He soon found himself trying to calm a resident who was ready to jump out of his skin.

“The guy’s saying, ‘I’m getting eaten up; something’s eating me alive; they’re all over me; I can’t take it anymore,’” Free said. “I’m telling the guy, ‘Settle down; take it easy; there’s no fleas here; there’s nothing eating you up.’”

But the man was in such distress and so insistent someone help him that Free asked him to find some of his tormentors and put them in a bottle. On a return visit he was handed a



Bob Giglione

Steve Free, owner of
The Bug Stops Here

container full of critters he'd never seen before.

"I'm in the industry 20 years and I don't know what the hell I'm looking at," Free said.

He found out quickly enough that he had a bottle of cimex lectularius, or bedbugs; oval, nocturnal creatures less than one fifth of an inch long, little devils who are always hungry. They suck six times their weight in blood, feeding as long as 10 minutes on a host. No wonder they like your bed as much as you do.

The reason Free had no idea what he'd discovered is that bedbugs were almost completely wiped out in this country after World War II. Before that, bedbug infestations could be quite severe, but the use of DDT helped to eliminate them. With DDT banned as harmful to humans, the indomitable bedbug has returned. With a vengeance.

Free said his Islandwide business has increased close to 40 percent in the last year, due to bedbugs. "The money's great, don't get me wrong," Free said. "But this epidemic is frightening."

Frightening because eliminating or controlling the bedbug population is difficult with the insects claiming new territory every day. Bedbugs also don't discriminate, getting cozy in four star hotels and no-tell motels, in mansions and dilapidated shacks.

It's not just a Long Island problem. "Bedbugs are a major scourge throughout the country," said Leonard Douglan, executive director of the New York State Pest Management Control Association, which represents 190 businesses from large companies such as Terminix to smaller operations such as The Bug Stops Here, which has six employees. Members of the NYSPMCA have seen their bedbug calls increase "a thousandfold" over the last year, Douglan said.

The epidemic has helped the industry, Douglan said, since in these difficult economic times homeowners and businesses have cut back on services. "We hope to God restaurants and food establishments don't do that, because the implications could be terrible," Douglan said.

Free said he charges about \$500 a room to eliminate bedbugs. Douglan confirmed that was the industry standard although some pest-control outfits will charge more. "It's extremely labor intensive to get rid of them because you have to move all kinds of furniture and really look for them," Douglan said.

The problem has become so severe elsewhere that legal action has been taken. Jersey City, N.J., recently passed bedbug legislation forcing landlords to take an active role exterminating the blood suckers. The

New Jersey Assembly recently followed suit with similar legislation.

Free noted the problem is stopping an enemy that has itchy feet. "More and more people are traveling these days and bedbugs travel right along with them," he said. "You get bitten in your bed and hit the couch. A friend comes over, sits on your couch, goes home and now he has bedbugs," Free said.

He's found bedbugs behind picture frames, in clock radios, even in cell phones. Mattress services bring a new mattress to a house and take away an old one, and the bedbugs go along for the ride.

"They put the old mattress in the same truck as the new ones, close the door and it's dark in there," Free said. "The bugs crawl out of breaks in the plastic and crawl in the new mattresses."

Free uses different methods to keep his customers from feeling the wrath of the bedbug. Steaming mattresses often works. Moving the bed away from the wall can also help.

Educating the public is an important step, Free said, especially getting the word out that if you have bedbugs don't try to control the situation yourself. "You're guaranteed to make it worse by spreading them around," he said. "Calling professionals is the only way to stop the onslaught."