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Gloucester
County **Times**

Their brand, your business



Nick DiBello, 24, of Mantua, owns two Saladworks restaurant franchises in Pennsylvania.

By Carly Romalino

South Jersey is sprinkled with franchises. But behind every McDonald's, Hollywood Tans and Saladworks, is a face -- someone who invested their savings to supply the masses with tools, tans and tacos.

At 24 years old, Mantua Township resident Nick DiBello is the face behind two Saladworks restaurants in Pennsylvania -- the first in West Chester opened in January, and the other in West Grove in May.

"My dad owns his own business, so all of my life I wanted to own my own business and be my own boss," he said.

Opening a franchise is more than picking a product you love and putting a neon "open" sign in the window. It takes capital, business sense and between 60 and 80 hours a week overseeing operations. But franchisees have brand recognition and the assistance of a corporation on their side.

"It's very difficult making a wealth-building vehicle, working for someone else," said Saladworks President Paul Steck. "To a large degree, small business is where it's at ... they have

achieved results, both financial and personal, which they would never have achieved working for someone else."

In his franchises' infancy, DiBello said he spent between 80 and 90 hours a week managing the stores, and leveled out at 55 to 65 hours a week once they got going.

"It's like giving birth," said Steck. "The first six months of being a mother -- it's tough, but as they mature, it gets easier."

Saladworks, a chain that began in 1986 as a small business in the Cherry Hill Mall, has 96 locations from Illinois to Florida, and as far west as California.

Unlike independent small business owners, franchise owners have corporate offices to fall back on. Many corporations package information on hiring, firing, managing finances, purchasing supplies and other day-to-day management, so new franchisees struggle less while navigating through risks.

"Developing restaurants can be difficult, so it was nice to have that support," DiBello said.

He was assisted by the company in choosing locations for the stores, as well as which contractors to hire to make renovations to the space.

According to Steck, 20 percent of franchisee applicants are turned down because they do not fit the criteria both in personality, values, and finances.

"We just don't sell franchises," he said. "We award them."

"There are some financial requirements we have," he added. "If we don't put them into place, they would run out of cash in a certain amount of time."

On the low end, Steck said a Saladworks franchise can cost as much as \$250,000 to get started. But depending on the trade channels -- setting up shop in a strip mall or a free-standing building -- the venture could cost a franchisee as much as \$530,000.

"(Steck's) range is pretty accurate," DiBello said. "\$410,000 was our cost to open each one. We put some of our own capital in, and we did supplement that with a loan."

"If someone doesn't have access to that amount of capital," Steck added, "they are not going to succeed."

Typically franchisees will see a return on their investment after the first few months. Sometimes the first full year is a struggle. According to Steck, 70 percent of the 96 franchisees own two or more Saladworks franchises, with some owning as many as eight.

"No one will do it a second time unless they are making money," Steck said.

