

### Soap Opera

By WENDI WINTERS For The Capital

Shirley Verdonck's skin just itches.

The 59-year-old Crofton woman has scratched herself so often at the night, she'd awake to find blood on her sheets.

Doctors have given her steroid creams but nothing worked. Nothing, that is, until her husband read an article about the start-up of a Davidsonville manufacturer with an all-natural liquid soap line.

He got some of the company's samples for his suffering wife. She was a little skeptical of Keys Soap's claims that eliminating ubiquitous foam-producing chemicals like sodium laureth sulfate and ammonium laureth sulfate in favor of organic essential oils produces a better soap.

But 12 days later, Mrs. Verdonck said her condition cleared up dramatically.

"It's got to be something in the product. I regret I didn't take any before photos because my husband is stunned at the difference in my appearance," she said. "The itching has stopped."

You probably haven't heard of the Keys Soap company or its small line of just four products. That will change if owners Bob Root and Wendy Steele have their way.

It is not yet on store shelves, though it is available online at [www.keys-soap.com](http://www.keys-soap.com) and at the Anne Arundel Dermatology Center in Annapolis.

The small company's founders are a childless married couple, both executives from other industries. Their marriage is the second for both.

Wendy Steele, 49, is a former vice president of Coca Cola Enterprises, a business partner with the Coca Cola Co. Her husband, Bob Root, 54, comes out of Silicon Valley and was an early pioneer in the personal computer industry at Apple Computer and other Fortune 500 companies.

Today, he's involved in developing nano-technology, micro-machines and bio-technology. He is a board member of the Chesapeake Innovation Center in Anne Arundel County, which specializes as a hatchery for Homeland Security firms.

After meeting on a business trip, the couple left their respective jobs, got married and set up their own businesses under the name Orion Group. Ventures included Orion Learning International, Steelfish Technology Marketing and, now Keys Soap - Orion Personal Care Products.

Orion Learning provides experiential adventures, like outdoor simulations, white water rafting and ropes courses, plus learning programs for corporations around the world.

They moved here from the West Coast in 1999 after deciding the area was central to their travel needs, and positioned them to better communicate with Orion's 300 self-employed contractors.



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They lived well and traveled widely, indulging in their love of the outdoors, sailing and quirky FFR Cobra cars. Along the way, they wrote a book about their intertwined paths called "Defining Moments, A Brand New Day."

Then, in '96, Mr. Root discovered a strange waxy-looking spot near his wife's ankle. When it turned red a few days later, they hustled to a dermatologist. It was a cancerous melanoma and was quickly excised. Ms. Steele's days of baking in the sun abruptly ended.

While Mr. Root continued to blithely sally forth into the sunshine, she mummified herself under protective hats, clothing and lotions and hated them all. Her fair skin, always sensitive, became more so. When she scratched herself, red welts appeared that would last for hours.

"Lotions clogged my pores and felt sticky, I couldn't stand the feeling!" she said.

Her skin continued to get drier and itchier and the bathroom filled up with Ms. Steele's discarded lotions and potions. To her annoyance, she noticed her husband's skin was as soft as the proverbial baby's bottom.

"I used to use Dr. Bronners, a castile soap," he said. "It has paraffins, glycerins and hippie smells like hemp, eucalyptus and peppermint. It improved some of Wendy's problems but it dried her skin out. I dabbled, but not seriously, for several years trying to find a solution."

Mr. Root recalled an earlier experience when he owned an avocado ranch in California. After a day of picking the fruit, its contents were used by the workers to clean and soften their hands. He began concocting a recipe, adding avocado, essential oils of citrus and sage, soft oils (oils that are liquid at room temperature, useful for conditioning) and additional soft oils for emollients.

Through trial and error - and more as a chef than a scientist - he concocted a recipe that Ms. Steele liked. They called it Island Rx.

The base formula is cooked in a beaker on a Bunsen burner in their home office and lightly scents the interior of their rambling, warm home decorated in a streamlined Santa Fe style.

The resultant 750 milliliters of secret syrup are poured into 5 gallons of specially treated water to make the soap. Up to 8,000 bottles of their product eventually will be shipped weekly from a factory in the Northeast.

The soap does not contain the chemicals that they feel contributed to Ms. Steele's itching problem, nor does it contain Vitamin E or any other chemicals, additives, preservatives or dyes. They do not test on animals, but are doing a focus group test on 75 teenagers at a nearby high school.

Some more tinkering produced two soaps for Mr. Root, the citrusy Windsurfer and Galleyon, a citrus and mint scented antibacterial hand soap. For their dog, Disney, they developed a pet soap, Muttineer, containing calmative Neem oil from India.

Friends and associates who tried Mr. Root's recipes encouraged them to market the soaps.

"Bob is one of the people instrumental for Silicon Valley's rise, said Alexis Henderson, vice president of corporate communications for the county Economic Development Corp. "He's been an asset to many high-tech firms."

Aware Mr. Root was formulating soap recipes, Ms. Henderson asked for a sample to take on a whale-watching trip on the Baja Peninsula.

"We were in a place with just a tent and no running water. We were told to bring phosphate-free soap, so I used the one Wendy uses.

"I have extremely dry skin," she said. "After using this soap, it feels great. It doesn't feel tight getting out of the shower. I love the way it smells. I've been using it for three months."

For now, the products, which all have the same core formula cooked in that office beaker, are blended in the duos wooded Davidsonville home office with CAW micelle - Catalyst Altered Water - and bottled in bromo blue bottles.

Mr. Root adapted a machine developed by a California wine-producing pal of his to fill multiple bottles of wine at one time. His version pours the Keys Soap product quickly into four bottles simultaneously without spillage. Another machine wraps labels smoothly around each bottle.

The two are able to fill orders efficiently. When the demand exceeds their ability to respond quickly, they'll shift that part of production to the off-site factory.

Prices for 8 ounce bottles range from \$19.95 for Island RX to \$12.95 for Galleyon. Sounds expensive, except that users are advised they only need a drop or two of the product at a time.

"We're not targeting a particular age group with our soaps," said Mr. Root. "We are targeting people with allergic, affected and sensitive skin. Our customer is people with psoriasis and rosacea. Teens with acne. Our product appeals to Europeans because they use a lot of liquids, not bar soaps.

"They use the same product head-to-toe, they don't have separate shampoos and body soaps."

Keys Soap - "named for our favorite places," explained Ms. Steele - will eventually employ 8 to 10 people when it gets going. They recently hired Curt Weaver, founder of Internet Commerce Strategies, to handle sales and marketing. Together, they plan to promote Keys Soap like a fine wine. No door-to-door sales or pyramid selling.

They see it as their mission to properly educate consumers before they try the soaps.

"We've been looking at how Whole Foods presents and sells its body care products," said Ms. Steele. "The people in the Body Shop there are on top of things. If a customer wants a phosphate-free product, they can rattle off which ones would work for that customer."

Their plans include selling through skin care techs in dermatology offices and Mr. Root hints they are in talks with a major department store.

The campaign is beginning to pick up steam with its introduction at the Anne Arundel Dermatology Center in mid-April.

"We'll be selling it to our patients on the Internet and on location, said medical esthetician Colleen Owings. "We'll be that place for them, a little boutique."