



Local Views

Scrub toxins out of dry cleaning process

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By CANDICE KIM

The message sends a chill up the spine of all small business owners: We're not renewing your lease, and you have to move.

That's exactly what local dry cleaner Hans Kim faced in 1999 when his landlord told him to leave because of skyrocketing insurance costs involving dry-cleaning solvents.

Most dry cleaning businesses use a toxic solvent called perchloroethylene, or "perc."

Kim's story actually has a happy ending -- but first there's an even better ending for all of California.

On Jan. 25, California became the first state in the nation to approve a phaseout of perchloroethylene. By 2023, dry-cleaning machines that use perc won't be allowed in the state.

Perc can cause cancer and damage the central nervous system, kidneys, liver, lungs and reproductive organs. It irritates the skin, nose and eyes.

More than 3 million pounds of this toxic chemical are released in our communities annually, making it one of California's top 10 air contaminants. It has also polluted one in 10 state public water wells.

After Kim received his landlord's ultimatum, he had no idea what to do.

Then Kim met Peter Sinsheimer, director of the Pollution Prevention Education & Research Center at Occidental College. He showed Kim a safer method, known as wet cleaning, that has been successful in Europe.

Most cleaners use perchloroethylene -- which often leaves a strong odor in clothes. Wet cleaning, Kim learned, is a safer and more affordable system, plus there's no toxic chemical or smell left on the clothes.

Today, after seven years as a professional wet cleaner, Kim has six profitable and successful Nature's Best Cleaners in Riverside, Alta Loma, Rancho Cucamonga, Palm Springs and Fountain Valley.

Kim takes calls daily from perchloroethylene dry cleaners facing the same ultimatum he once received.

Kim spends a lot of time helping these cleaners switch to the wet cleaning method. He also tells them about the grants offered by the state and the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which help cleaners buy new, non-perchloroethylene machines.

When asked about what he'd like to see for the future of the clothes-cleaning industry, Kim said he dreams of a time when "every community in California has access to safe, effective wet cleaning."

That's a clean-air future we dream of, too.

Candice Kim works on air pollution issues for the Coalition for Clean Air's campaign and advocacy team. She is not related to Hans Kim.
