

National Report

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Broiling on the Outside, But, Really, It's No Sweat

By SARA RIMER

HOUSTON,
June 27 — What
heat wave?

The profession-
als eating lunch at

the cafes in the air-conditioned pedestrian tunnels that wind under downtown were in suits and long-sleeved dresses and sweaters. One takeout establishment, The Coffee Bar, was advertising hot cocoa "for those cold days." People were buying it.

Sure, it's even hotter and more humid here this summer than it has been in recent memory, with temperatures hovering near 100 degrees in recent weeks. But those are the conditions outside. Who but out-of-towners, and the diehards, goes outside? For all the legendary toughness of Texans, when it comes to summer, Houstonians concede, they stay indoors.

"They're pantywaists," said Charles Valentine. "They want air-conditioning."

Not that Mr. Valentine is complaining. He makes his living repairing air-conditioners. Summer is when Houston makes much of its self-proclaimed reputation as the Air-Conditioning Capital of the World.

No doubt mindful of the reports of unenticing, steamy days and nights — caused by its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico — the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau advertises these facts:

Nearly 90 percent of the homes in the area, and just about every business is air-conditioned. Most Houstonians run their air-conditioners seven months a year. The Astrodome, built in 1965, was the world's first air-conditioned domed stadium.

Pickup trucks are air-conditioned.

And the tunnels, which link the major downtown office buildings and offer things like underground dining banking and dry cleaning, make it possible to work downtown without ever venturing outside.

"Without Freon, we'd be dead," said John Prewitt, a Coffee Bar regular. Mr. Prewitt, a banker, was dressed for the air-conditioning in a long-sleeved shirt, a navy blazer and dark trousers.

Over the years, people have been drawn to Houston by, among other things, its oil, its world-class hospitals and the aerospace industry. Dave Debien says he moved here from Ohio 25 years ago because, well, because of the air-conditioning. "I live it, I breathe it, I love it," he said. "Houston is the most air-conditioned city in the world. This is it."

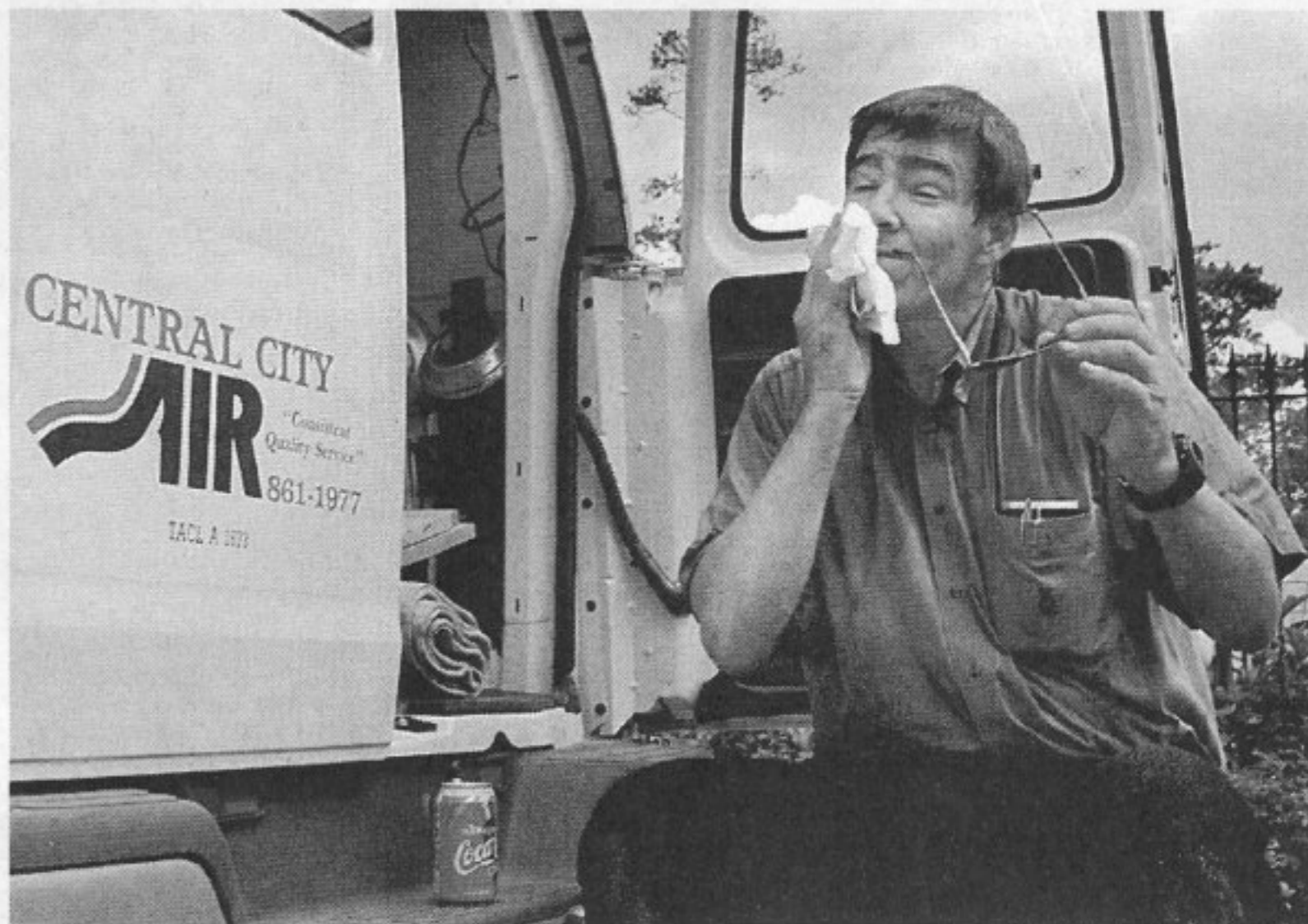
Mr. Debien is known around town as the guru of air-conditioning. He owns an air-conditioning installation and repair company, lectures and writes on the subject, and appears regularly on a local radio show to field questions about air-conditioning for three hours at a stretch.

"We can live without computers," Mr. Debien said. "We can't live without air-conditioning. It's like running water." Expensive running water. Mr. Debien charges \$60 to \$80 an hour.

On Wednesday, Mr. Debien, 50, got out of the hospital after an angioplasty. On Thursday, he was back at work. The office phones were ringing off the hook. Air-conditioning systems were breaking down. People were hot, and they were desperate.

"They can't stand to be three or four degrees away from their normal comfort level," Mr. Debien said.

There is a hierarchy of desperation among the overheated. When Bethany Hughes telephoned, in tears,



Nicole Fruge for The New York Times

Sizzling days in Houston are money in the bank for Dave Debien, owner of Central City Air. Speaking of air-conditioning, in one of the most-air-conditioned cities in the country, he said, "I live it, I breathe it, I love it."

Cool times in the city where Freon is king seven months of the year.

Mr. Debien moved her instantly to the top of the list. Mrs. Hughes is 8½ months pregnant. "A woman eight months pregnant, with no air," he said. "That's as close to a catastrophe as you can get."

Mr. Debien was in his air-conditioned Chevy Suburban, heading for the wealthy River Oaks section,

where his men were installing central air-conditioning at a new house.

Most Houstonians have central air, Mr. Debien said. "I don't do window units," he said. "I didn't say to the surgeon when I went in for my angioplasty, 'While you're in there, can you fix that liver problem?' I'm a specialist."

In Houston summers, there are two kinds of women: Those who go bare-legged, and those who would not consider appearing in public without pantyhose, not even when the air is so thick that breathing is a chore.

In the latter category is Betsy Parish, who writes an Internet gossip column for Microsoft's city guide, houston.sidewalk (<http://www.houston.sidewalk.com>). "It's a mark of being dressed," Ms. Parish said.

She showed her mettle recently when attending an outdoor ceremony to dedicate a Texas state historical marker in honor of her great-great-grandfather, Horace Dickinson Taylor, one of the early mayors of Houston. It was close to 100 degrees, yet Ms. Parish wore a light green suit and beige pantyhose.

Inside, Ms. Parish demands perpetual cool. She recalled her meltdown last summer, when she felt hot in her own home. Declaring an emergency, she summoned an air-conditioning repairman. "He waved that wand in the air that checks the temperature, and said, 'Miss Parish, is 64 degrees too warm for you?'"

The air-conditioning was working just fine. "I was having a hot flash," Ms. Parish said.