

Tuesday, July 14, 1998

A season of distress

■ Demand is huge to keep air going

By CLAUDIA KOLKER
Houston Chronicle

David Debien is one of the very few who, truly and gratefully, can tell himself during these sweltering days, "For this, I came to Houston."

Today he owns an air-conditioning repair business.

Fascinated by the air-conditioning industry, Debien, now 49, moved here with his young wife from Ohio 25 years ago to enroll in the University of Houston's air-conditioning program.

Although he never completed the four-year, accredited program, Debien learned enough to become Houston's self-styled "air-conditioning guru."

Now, with the temperature nudging 100 degrees week after week, Debien and his colleagues are in

their glory.

Debien, whose air-conditioning installation and repair service employs about 25 people, says his business is "maxed out" with service calls.

"We cannot do any more work than what we are doing," he says. In a slow month, the company grosses about \$100,000 to \$110,000 from service calls, Debien says; recently, the figures have been closer to \$250,000 per month.

And it's not as if he has a monopoly. Not coincidental to its hot and humid climate, Houston boasts 2,000 licensed air-conditioning repair contractors — more per capita than any other U.S. city, Debien says.

A glance through the Yellow Pages shows air-conditioning's allure, with luscious names beckoning like Popsicles to victims of busted cooling systems.

There are, for instance, Cloud-Air, Comfort Systems, Cool World, Alpine Air, Breeze Control and Chill-Co.

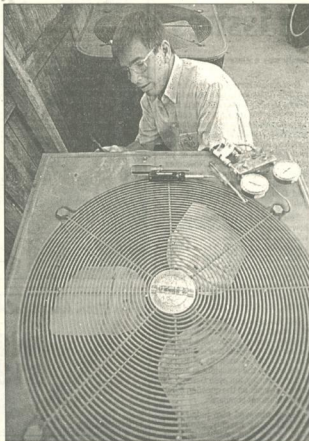
But despite the number of providers, demand for service is enormous, contractors say. About 90 percent of Houston's households have air conditioning, and Debien says repair services are asking each other not to refer clients — their hands are full.

"There's been nothing like this," says Chris Walter, owner of Extreme Air Conditioning Services. "We're working 12 to 15 hours a day. We work as much as we can. Sometimes, we just have to take off" to rest.

Houston Lighting & Power Co., which feeds electricity to the city's air-conditioning units, is also feeling the heat, spokeswoman Leticia Rowe says.

On July 7, HL&P reached its record one-day consumption of energy — 13.9 million kilowatt hours, most attributable to air conditioning, Rowe says. But, she adds, there's little reason to worry the juice will run out.

"We're watching the weather closely," Rowe says. "We are running our equipment to its maximum; it's feeling a lot of stress from the heat." But, Rowe adds, "HL&P is interconnected to the Texas transmission grid, so we can help each other if the



Melissa Mahan / Chronicle

David Debien, owner of an air-conditioning repair and installation business, fixes a broken air conditioner in the Heights. Houses in the area, Debien says, are among the best-designed for keeping cool.

need should arise."

That need, says National Weather Service forecaster Joshua Richter, won't be going away soon.

While chances for rain have increased a bit — a 20 percent to 30 percent possibility through Saturday — temperatures will remain in the mid- to upper 90s, Richter says.

It's a prospect that appeals to few, perhaps, except those in the air-conditioning industry.

Yet while air conditioning has been very, very good to David Debien — who lectures nationally to industry members and opines on a home improvement radio program — he insists that air conditioning in a city like Houston is more than a business. It is a passion and a mission.

"Air conditioning is a life support system," Debien says. "This city could not survive without it."