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Title: SUPERMARKETS RECLAIM NAME OF NATIONAL WORKERS, CUSTOMERS REUNITE AT 8 STORES
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For Natalie Klamen, Tuesday's reopening of National Markets' store in University City seemed almost like a family reunion.

The scene was one of many across the area Tuesday, when the National name returned to area supermarkets. Family Co. of America, which bought 23 stores Monday from Schnuck Markets Inc., opened eight of them Tuesday as National Markets. It will open eight more today and seven on Thursday.

Klamen, a 35-year resident of University City, stopped by to restock her larder after a vacation. She greeted produce manager Kurt Bradshaw and pharmacist Mike Fitzgerald like long-lost friends, asking about her favorite checkers - the ones who know her by name - and checking to see whether the store will stock Passover supplies.

"This is my friend, Mike Fitzgerald," Klamen said, introducing the pharmacist to a reporter. Fitzgerald usually can guess what she needs before she asks him, she said.

The store's employees are "like a family," Klamen said.

Schnucks bought 57 National Super Markets here last summer, but the Federal Trade Commission made it sell 24 stores to preserve competition. Schnucks plans to sell the 24th store, the Garden Market on Ladue Road, to Wild Oats Markets Inc. of Boulder, Colo.

Family Co. was formed nearly a year ago. Principals include James R. Gibson, a Belleville financial consultant; Ron Jezierski, a former vice president for **National Supermarkets**; and Charles K. Lehnbeuter, the chief financial officer and a former vice president with Oppenheimer & Co., a stock brokerage.

Jezierski, president and chief operating officer, said shoppers will see some gaps in merchandise as the stores reopen. The chain won't offer weekly specials until next week, after all stores are open and fully stocked.

Schnucks closed the 23 stores at 8 p.m. Saturday to remove perishables and take inventory. Family Co. got the keys Monday and began taking its own inventory, changing shelf tags and replenishing the stock of perishables like produce and meat.

Fleming Co., the Oklahoma food distributor that is supplying Family Co., sent as many as 20 employees to each store to help prepare for the openings. Other vendors were stocking shelves and pricing merchandise.

Family Co. expects to have about 1,700 employees, including between 800 and 900 former National employees. Some of them have been working temporarily for Schnucks.

Many employees worked late into the night Monday, and then returned early Tuesday to greet customers, bake bread and make sandwiches in the delis. Despite some last-minute snafus, the eight stores scheduled for reopening Tuesday were all open by 10 a.m., Jezierski said.

Rich Mueller, manager of the University City store, said computer glitches delayed the opening of his store until 9 a.m. Tuesday. The video department wasn't open yet, but all other service departments were up and running. A new sign was going up outside.

Rachel Macklin said the University City reopening gave her "a sense of freedom," adding, "I think we need variety" in places to shop.

Fitzgerald, the pharmacist, said he had refused an offer to work at a store nearer his home because he likes the people who frequent the University City store - a rich ethnic mix that includes Jews, blacks and Chinese.

Tom Richardson, manager of the Kirkwood store, said Tuesday marked the end of 14 months of uncertainty for National employees. Richardson had been with National for 23 years, including 13 years as a store manager.

Richardson said shoppers may see some Schnucks and President's Choice brands in the stores now, but they soon will be replaced with a new group of store brands, including National, Kare, Hyde Park, Rainbow and Marquee, a premium brand that is similar to President's Choice.

In the bakery department, National will offer Danish Kitchens, a brand of cakes from Fleming. Stores with bakeries will offer their own fresh-baked bread, bagels and decorated cakes.

Sue Jablonski, the deli manager in Kirkwood, said she was glad to work for Family Co. after 22 years with the old National. Family Co. offered her the same pay and benefits she earned before. "It is a real good deal for everyone," she said.

At Jefferson and Lafayette avenues, store manager Sterling Moody said the worst problem was a computer that wanted to price every item at \$3.19. The store got the problem fixed before opening at 8:20 a.m., he said. But it didn't have milk until 10 a.m.

The seafood department wasn't fully stocked, and some shelves weren't full. Moody said the store was awaiting four truckloads of merchandise.

Moody said the store plans to remove rails that prevent shoppers from taking carts into the parking lot. Moody said that the rails were designed to prevent theft of carts, but that they also reduced sales.

He said the store is installing new lights on the parking lot so it can begin 24-hour operation soon.

Caption:

Color Photo By Larry Williams/Post-Dispatch - John Bess (left) and Stan Lampe of DeMond Sign Inc. install a National sign on a former Schnucks Market store in Bellefontaine Neighbors. Eight National Markets opened Tuesday.

Caption:

PHOTO

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