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“There’s no manual for a laundromat!”

During the first tour I was given of Beach Solar Laundromat, owner Alex Winch turned to me after I asked “How did you know to do this?” and responded with a smile: “There’s no manual for a laundromat!” There’s no manual for his life either. He makes it up as he goes along.

Born in Edmonton and raised in Burlington, Alex came to Bay Street in 1985 after graduating from Queen’s Engineering Physics. How did he come to Beach Solar Laundromat and Monk’s Fine Fabric Care? “That’s a long story.” Yes it certainly is. This is the distilled version. The geek version is @: https://www.beachsolarlaundromat.ca/alex-winch-interview-2026-06-10-oro/

In 1985, Alex became a very successful Bay Street technology analyst. Four years later his boss disagreed with some of his valuations so he independently continued researching Canadian companies, starting a hedge fund in 1990 and expanding to a New York City office. In 1994, The Beach Village called him home: “Walking along Queen, shopkeepers were overwhelmingly friendly and legitimate. That weighed the balance between neighbourhoods where my partner and I looked.” In 1995, he retired on performance fees to enjoy his new neighbourhood.

But Garth Drabinsky sued Alex after he wrote a letter to Forbes rebutting a claim Drabinsky made in an article that Livent’s books were accurate. Facing deep pockets, Alex agreed to publish apologies, cover shorts, and a three-year silence. “It was unjust, but I saved my nest egg from a fight my lawyers said we couldn’t win.” Drabinsky was charged and jailed soon after, but the Livent shareholders Alex had wanted to protect, lost.

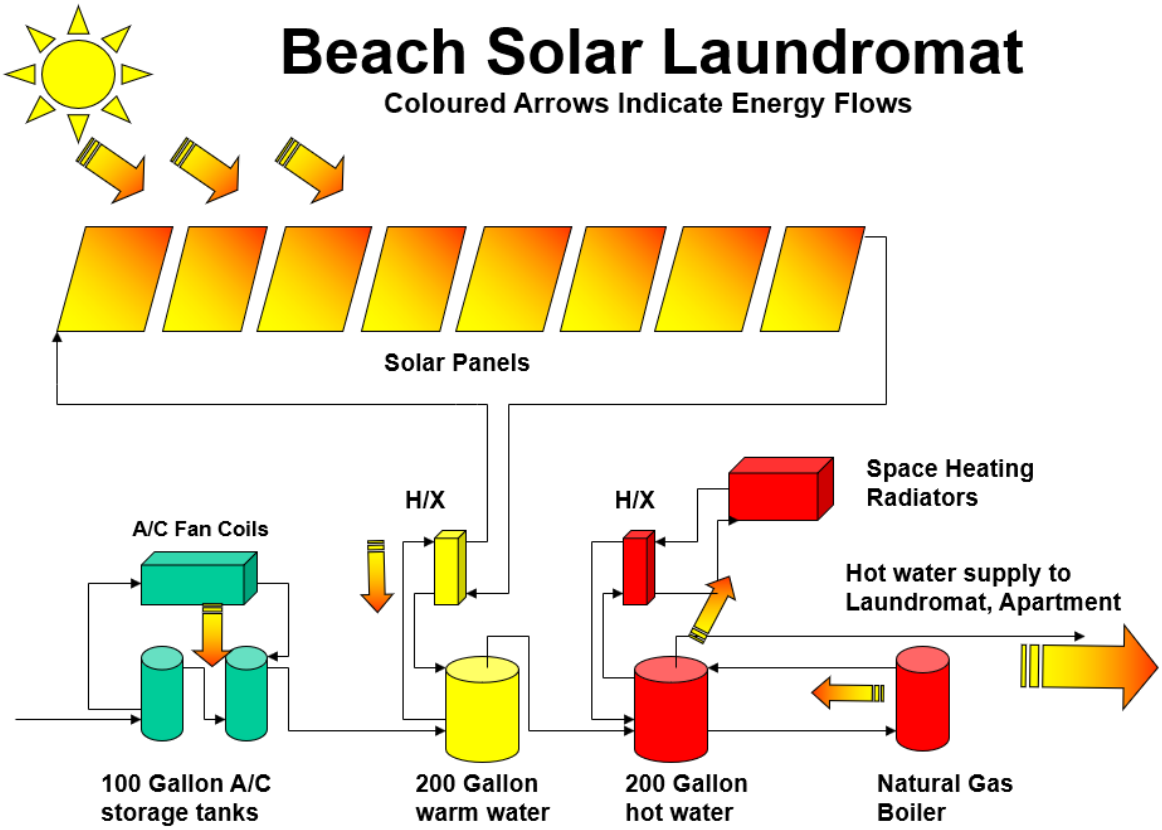
Alex had invested in a Californian company running casinos at a loss, so he volunteered to help improve returns. Elected to the board and then made chair, he was quickly asked to resign when recommendations he was making for governance changes angered everyone else. He left, but then met with shareholders who agreed to a hostile proxy fight and gave him authority to battle for them, which they won. The board was changed over and the company reported a profit the next quarter.

Pivoting gladly away from that world, in 2002 Alex paid cash for bricks & mortar on Queen Street East: “I wanted to get my arms around my investment and have 100% control. The building had a laundromat, vacant store, and upstairs apartment, held together with chewing gum and duct tape ~ the perfect project for me.”

Why perfect? His research days into other peoples’ startups had prepared him for what lay ahead. “Running a small business is a non-stop sequence of addressing issues. When you first get started, every transaction or interaction is an issue requiring your attention. As you grow, and iterate, only the exceptions to the norm will require your attention. Your day will still be happily filled.”

Alex’s idea for his first problem-solving project came from having designed and installed a solar

shower in the wilds of Muskoka for family. For his business, he went professional to commission a solar thermal roof installation ~ the fun schematic is on Beach Solar's wall ~ and rebranded as Beach Solar Laundromat. "I bought and upgraded a community utility that could be a service. My machines see heavy use evenings and weekends. Weekday Wash & Fold staff could keep machines busy and assist walk-ins."



Photos & captions by Alex Winch: "Even the Energy has a Map!"

Alex needed staff to assist customers, so he went to Neighbourhood Link to ask for seniors but came happily away with immigrants instead. Many who struggled with English received lessons from Cat, an Indigenous client who wanted to learn Chinese. Most were educated but unable to get work without a Canadian reference, and working in Solar earned them that.

One of the things humans can count on is machines breaking down. If that happens at Beach Solar, the customer receives a refund and is listened to carefully while answering the question: "At what cycle stage did it crash?" Alex does his own repairs after closing with parts on hand, as tinkering is one fun part of his day. Another is garnering good notices, such as entering and winning the 2004 UN Bremen Prize as the best project globally using renewable energy in partnership with a social agency. However, in 2008 Neighbourhood Link bowed out and Janice Wheeler came on board to coordinate what has evolved into today's staff. As Alex puts it now: "Call Atiqa my human resources manager. She's calm, with the gift of listening then taking time

to answer where I, an engineer, can be gruff, abrupt and rude. Three generations of one family staff Wash & Fold. As a service-oriented utility, we become aware of neighbours' needs so lights are bright white: whites look white, colours pop, stains are visible."



Alex talking to Customer ~ "Easy Commercial Machines: Welcome to the House of Laundry!

Upstairs in the rental, Alex's tenants retired in 2018 and gave notice, so he decided to extend Solar's successful service. He quickly assembled the bits and pieces for drycleaning and Monk's Fine Fabrics opened 36 hours after the keys were returned. "Monk was my father's mother's name, so… my grandmother was a Monk? Well, that's better than the tagline that crossed my mind: Monk's Fine Fabric Care: Get into the Habit." The new venture required little investment: "I like the no-risk proposition. The factory we use takes the capital risk."

In 2020, COVID hit. Most businesses closed but dry cleaners and laundromats stayed open. However, laundry service was suspended, so Alex told his local NDP MPP, "I have senior clients and their laundry is a looming health hazard." Her response: "I've no authority to tell you this, but serve your seniors." They restarted after three weeks of employees' home on full pay. "I've never missed a payroll, but sometimes it's been a little hairy."

Alex used to close for Christmas Day until a couple of years ago, when he realised some of his neighbours didn't observe Christmas. "As a business, it's more prudent to be available than to recognize a holiday. It's a weighing of values."



Alex serving in Monk's ~ "Dry Cleaning and Wash & Fold picked up seven days a week: We'll even sell you your shirt off Your back!"

The most recent potential for negative impact was President Trump's tariff push, which had Alex asking: "What would be the impact on my business, on the soaps I use?" Answer: "I had fun developing Monk's Magic, mixing eco-friendly minerals then storing it in an airtight tub."

Most recently, Alex was asked to clean hockey equipment. After running numbers, fiscal and physics, he built equipment for about $1,000 that saturates with monatomic Oxygen, killing 99.9% of bacteria on anything. "I've done cat pee in a handbag. A musty leather jacket next morning smelt like butter. I'm not just having fun. I'm meeting neighbours' needs."

Alex's awareness of environmental and human impact began in high school. "Recognising you have talents and can make a difference by conduct, by encouraging, is my comfortable light footprint approach. When you see something can be done, there's no good reason not to do it if you have control. I've made a difference in the lives of underhoused people, since staff keep tokens for those in need. Occasionally concerning people come in; if staff is threatened, I call police, who ask, 'Is this a mental health call?' I answer, 'All I know is the threatening behaviour I'm seeing.' It's balance: I want safety and I want everyone to have clean clothes."

Alex walked Bay Street, served boards, and now runs a small business. “I work with my own capital; if return is adequate, I smile: good investment, good service and the unique selling proposition of a solar laundromat. Innovation proceeds from clear thinking strengthened by engineering and problem-solving. In high school I did fairly well in science fairs. Now I get to play with ozone cabinets. I’m the same child at heart.”

Beach Solar Laundromat & Monk’s Fine Fabric Care
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Remember: The geek version of this article is @
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