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EDITOR'S NOTE

A tale of 2 textiles vis-a-vis free trade agreement

By Mimi Whitefield

While helping put together a story on the South Florida job market last month, reporter Jane Bussey, who covers international trade, called two local textile companies. Both had a story to tell that went beyond the article she was working on at the time.

"Textile mill owners Alan Stark and Jorge Canals wanted people to know that hard work, a good idea, good technology, expertise -- the building blocks of a good company and a thriving economy -- all were getting swept away because of free trade," Bussey said. "One had closed down; the other worried about the future."

She listened to their stories, and then interviewed others with a range of views on the textile industry and the impact of globalization. The result of her research is this week's cover story, "Textile Troubles."

International trade long has been an important part of the local economy, and Miami is competing hard to win the headquarters of the Free Trade Area of the Americas secretariat. On Nov. 20-21, Miami also will play host to a ministerial meeting in which 34 trade ministers will discuss the state of negotiations for the proposed free trade area.

So Bussey said she found the textile manufacturers stories "sort of a surprise, given the almost single opinion on trade in Miami."

South Florida once had a thriving textile and apparel industry. Most of it has moved offshore, attracted by lower production costs. Free trade agreements, lower tariffs and even undervalued currencies have all encouraged the exodus. In the process, jobs have been lost.

Rather than creating a level playing field, Stark says, the balance has been tipped in favor of countries such as China. "They pay 20 cents an hour. Here you've got to pay over \$7 an hour in a factory" plus benefits, he says.

Still, others claim that U.S. textile manufacturers were protected for too long, and the reason they can't compete is because their companies are poorly run.

It's a complex issue. We hope today's cover story contributes to the debate.

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