

By Henry Bury
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What started out as a drop-in woodworking centre and teaching facility has also turned into a new furniture manufacturing business in Belleville.

Business partners John Chambers of Belleville and Napanee's Bill Cook — who spent three decades with Gibbard Furniture in Napanee — have already designed and manufactured three models of high-end solid maple occasional tables that are now on sale at several furniture stores.

They are also planning to introduce another line of quilt and television-stereo cabinets for the Ontario marketplace.

Their business is being operated entirely out of the Quinte Woodworking Centre at 45B Wilson Ave. off Sidney Street.

Chambers, 51, opened the centre in August of 2002 primarily as a drop-in facility where people can come in and use available equipment to complete their own woodworking projects and where he can teach afternoon and evening woodworking classes through Loyalist College. He also produced some custom work projects for people who wanted something unique created for them.

A year later, Chambers was introduced through a mutual friend to Cook, who was doing furniture design and consulting work for furniture clients after a 31-year career at Gibbard Furniture in Napanee.

The pair became friends and decided to dovetail their two woodworking operations into a single entity. They formed their company F.J. Cook Fine Furniture Inc., named in honour of Cook's father, who spent 47 years with Gibbard Furniture.

Both men are pleased to be in business for themselves doing what they love.

"I had this dream of being my own boss and having a company named after my father," Cook said. "This is in honour of what he taught me. I'm doing this in his memory. There is a real fulfillment in working with a quality product and quality people."

Chambers said the business is a "welcomed addition" to the centre he started a year after accepting a buyout package for his 22 years with Xerox.

"What has been my passion in woodworking has become a reality in manufacturing a good quality product for Ontario consumers," he said. "It's nice to teach and do custom work but I'd rather be building furniture full-time and that's what we will be doing with our new business."

Both Chambers and Cook are continuing to teach Loyalist woodworking classes and they invite people to drop into the centre by appointment only to work on projects until such time as their fledgling business takes doesn't make that possible any more.

Their company is relying heavily on Cook's 31 years' experience as designer, product engineer, sample maker, quality control and facility production manager at Gibbard to make quality furniture.

"Gibbard is a great old company with a fantastic product but it was time for me to pursue my own interests and furniture manufacturing," said Cook, who left the Napanee firm almost a year ago. "Working with the best Canadian furniture manufacturer and cabinet maker, I learned valuable skills and techniques that I wouldn't have learned anywhere else."

Cook said the business partners have identified and are now trying to fill a void in the market for affordable top-quality occasional tables. They have designed and produced three different lines of occasional tables — Queen Anne, Chippendale and casual country — for the retail furniture market in Ontario.

Each table is made from kiln-dried solid maple and is finished in either cherry, mahogany or walnut and retails from \$375 to \$725.

"We are producing a solid wood Canadian made affordable product that will rival anything that is done elsewhere," Cook said. "These occasional tables are already on some showroom floors and we have incoming orders to build for more clients."

The pair has also designed and built custom quilt cabinets and television-stereo cabinets for private individuals and is now planning to manufacture them for the retail sector.

They will continue to fill custom orders and even restore dilapidated antiques.

"We will custom design it, engineer it to our quality standards, give them a quote and be more than happy to custom build it for them," Cook said.

Cook and Chambers are in the process of upgrading the woodworking centre to include more industrial woodworking equipment.

"We would like to expand our operations to a manageable level and bring in some future employees to help with the production in a growing business," said Cook.

But, Chamber said, "In the future, we hope to find a niche that we are really comfortable with. We don't want to reinvent the wheel."

They can be reached at 962-1151.