

Acuity Insurance Retail Contest 2018

By Jason Thigpen, owner of Texas Heritage Woodworks

Two small, seemingly unrelated things changed our lives forever, a simple sentence and a free Social Media app. The sentence, "If you want that apron made, you'll just have to make it yourself". The Social Media app, Instagram.

Our origin story starts in the Fall of 2013. I was a full time automotive technician and hobbyist woodworker. My wife, Sarah, was a stay at home mom to our two young boys at the time, ages 4 years old and 10 months old. Sarah was also working from home in the little spare time she had doing embroidery to help make ends meet. I helped her out when I could, becoming quite proficient with sewing machines after many late nights helping fulfill embroidery orders. My woodworking hobby had started to pick up steam at this point and I was enthusiastically attempting project after project, excited about this new pursuit of mine. I was also bringing wood shavings and sawdust into the house each and every time I came inside. With a crawling baby in the house, shavings inevitably ended up in his mouth! I decided a proper workshop apron was needed to alleviate this issue. I looked online for one, only to be very disappointed at the offerings. Any place that sold aprons had only one apron available. There were no options. There were no color choices or size options. Each apron usually had the logo of the company emblazoned across the chest of the apron. No worries, I thought. My wife is a whiz on the sewing machine and could easily make an apron for me! Or so I thought. When you have an infant clinging to you at every waking minute of the day, making an apron is not a top priority. After about three months of casually suggesting that I needed an apron, the life changing sentence came. "If you want that apron made, you'll just have to make it yourself". She had a point. I was pretty handy with a sewing machine at that point, and I obviously knew what I wanted in an apron. So I decided to take my wife's advice (almost always a good decision) and I made my own apron.

Coincidentally, right around the time I was making my first apron was when I also downloaded the free Social Media app, Instagram. I had only begun to play around with Instagram and had a whopping 42 followers when I had finished my apron. I posted a photo of the apron, along with a brief caption discussing why I opted to make my own instead of buying a readily available option. Within a few hours of that post, I had a fellow craftsman send me an email and ask if I could make a similar apron for him. His was wearing out and he really liked the approach I took when I made mine. I thought about it for a few days, then decided to go ahead and make his apron in exchange for some antique woodworking tools he had. He received the apron and loved it, ranting and raving about its quality on his Instagram account, which had close to 1,200 followers at the time. That was when the onslaught started. I gained over 1,000 followers in the days that followed and my email inbox was filling up with requests for shop aprons. Sarah and I were in shock. This was not something we had expected nor anticipated. I had one of two choices to make. Either tell everyone no, or say yes and see what happened. We said yes.

2013 ended and 2014 began. We found ourselves busy making aprons and attempting to curate our Instagram account with eye catching content to help grow this unexpected new business. In addition to the aprons, we also worked on developing a line of tool rolls for woodworkers using the same basic materials and construction methods that we used on our aprons. The Spring of 2014 was a big one for us, both professionally and personally. Professionally, we had committed to exhibiting our products at Woodworking In America in September. It was going to be our first woodworking event and was a pretty big deal for us. We even purchased our first industrial sewing machine to help with the increase in production. Personally, we found that Sarah was pregnant with our third boy and was due in January! In September, my visibly pregnant wife and I flew to Winston-Salem for Woodworking In America. The two day event was a big one for us. Not only did we have nonstop customers swinging by our booth to purchase our wares, but we also had the opportunity to meet several of our woodworking idols and develop strong bonds with them. It was a life changing weekend for sure. I can clearly recall the moment on the way home when I looked at Sarah and said, "This is what we are supposed to do. We need to figure out how to do this full time". She enthusiastically agreed. From that moment on, all of our focus was on building our brand and trying to sever our dependence on the steady paycheck that comes from a 9-5 job.

Sarah's third pregnancy was a difficult one. Halfway through, she was diagnosed with Hyperemesis Gravidarum, a serious pregnancy condition that results in severe nausea, vomiting, and fatigue throughout the entire pregnancy. It was affecting her so much that I made a decision. On October 31st, 2014, I left my full time job for the last time and came home as a self-employed person. That ended up being one of the more difficult decisions I ever made, but hands down one of the best. I was able to stay home all day and help my wife through this difficult period. I was able to hang out with my two young sons, who normally I would only get to see for a short period at the end of the day after I had come home from work. Now I was around them all the time and it was wonderful! I was also able to stay in my workshop for longer periods, focusing on improving my processes and productivity. If I was going to make aprons and tool rolls full time, I had to be efficient in doing so. I was able to streamline my production, increase my efficiency, increase the quality of our products, and grow our brand exponentially in the process. In January 2015, our third son was born and things couldn't be better. Business was booming, we had three healthy boys, and I was blessed with the opportunity to see them all day, every day, as I worked from home. Sarah had also increased her presence in the everyday operations of the company as our children grew, handling a majority of our email correspondence, all of our bookkeeping, and helping keep me focused on the task at hand (I can go off on a tangent at times!). I had finally found my purpose in life at the age of 35. I was in my element and it showed. Not only was I making tool rolls and aprons at a record setting pace, I was also flexing my creative muscle a bit by writing articles for Furniture & Cabinetmaking Magazine in the UK and Popular Woodworking here in the United States. All the while, our Instagram account was steadily gaining followers and influence.

In the Summer of 2015, we decided to sell our house on the outskirts of Austin and move back to the country. We moved to my wife's family ranch outside of Menard, Texas. I moved my shop into Sarah's grandfather's old shop and our family moved into the house that Sarah's great grandfather had purchased back in 1926. Our boys are the fifth straight generation to live in that house and the seventh

straight generation to live in Menard County, going all the way back to 1865. Moving out to the ranch created the opportunity to grow our business by leaps and bounds. When living in the city, Texas Heritage existed in half of a 2-car garage. Every tool or big piece of equipment we used was on wheels. The entire shop had to be re-arranged with each operation of the manufacturing process. Having more space allowed for dedicated workstations and the ability to expand what we do. We could now implement more leatherwork and woodworking into our business model. The leatherwork has been one of our more popular additions and has given me space for a little artistic expression. As a business that specialized in workshop accessories, using leather as holsters, sheaths, and holders for various woodworking tools really opened up some possibilities for us. We have not only been implementing leatherwork into our repertoire, we are also teaching leatherworking classes. This Spring, Sarah and I will be teaching a four day Master Leatherworking Course at the Pratt Fine Art Institute in Seattle. To be able to share what we've learned and to help keep this wonderful craft alive is satisfying beyond belief. Having additional space also meant I could pursue my woodworking that started all of this in the first place! Since being on the ranch, I have restored the wooden frame of a 1950 Jaguar XK120 roadster (<http://www.txheritage.net/jaguar-xk120/>) which is bound for the esteemed Pebble Beach car show. I have built custom seats for canoes that have been featured in the Wall Street Journal Magazine(<https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-this-canoes-costs-100-000-1465830784>), Esquire magazine, the Financial Times of London, and in an Emmy Award winning documentary. As an added bonus, my continued pursuit of woodworking gives me the perfect platform for testing our potential new products. When I think of an idea, I make a prototype and test it extensively in a real world environment. This ensures that our products work the way our customer base expects them too.

With all of this growth and exposure, our need for a larger space, and also some employees, started to be in the forefront of our minds. We were hesitant to build a larger shop on the ranch. That would mean that any employees we hired would be coming to our home every single day to work. Since we homeschool our three boys, we weren't too keen on having people come to our house. We knew that the best option would be a place in the town of Menard, which is about 15 miles from the ranch. In August of 2017, we found and acquired the perfect place. The old Benchoff Building in Menard is an 8,000 square foot, two story stone building that was originally a General Store when it was constructed in 1900. It was closed down for good in the early 1980's and has since fallen into poor shape, notably a severely leaking roof that needs to be repaired as soon as possible. We have been working hard over the last year to prep the building for the roof repairs. The entire building needs to be emptied before the construction company can start the repairs. When the doors were shut in the 80's, all of the inventory and equipment was left inside. After three decades of neglect, we have our work cut out for us. You can see some of our progress and learn more about the building here, <http://www.txheritage.net/benchoff-building>.

The Benchoff Building is the future of Texas Heritage Woodworks. We plan to have all of our manufacturing operations upstairs, with walls lined with industrial sewing machines, leather working stations, and woodworking benches. The first 1,000 square feet on the first floor will be a traditional General Store, selling all of our products as well as other handmade wares such as wooden utensils, felt hats, roasted coffee beans, etc. Behind the General Store, we will have a 2,000 square foot classroom.

This classroom will be used for teaching courses in woodworking, leatherworking, quilting, spoon carving, hat making, and much, much more. Some classes will be taught by us, others will be taught by numerous talented craftspeople in our large network of customers, friends, and collaborators. We also plan to offer after school programs for the local youth, focusing on the instruction of various hand skills and trades that could potentially lead to employment later on in life. Reinvesting back into the community will be a top priority for us. Having a large location in town will also allow us to employ people to help make our products, promote our business, and grow our brand. We've got a lot of work ahead of us, there's no doubt about that. Having witnessed the growth of our brand in the last five years has given us the confidence to pursue such lofty aspirations. Our growth is the result of our Social Media presence and word of mouth advertising. We haven't spent a dime to promote our company, instead preferring quality customer feedback paired with exceptional product quality and compassionate customer service. Our customer base is staunchly supportive of what we do, and that support is what drives us each and every day. We never intended to launch a company that specializes in workshop accessories strictly through the use of Social Media, but here we are. Our lives, and the lives of our three boys, have been forever changed for the better. And it was all because of two simple, seemingly unrelated things. A small sentence, and a free Social Media app. The Land of Opportunity indeed!