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Omaha woodworking firm spreads its expertise to a new how-to book



MATT MILLER

Brothers Dan, left, and Dennis Zongker started Zongkers Custom Furniture in 1989. They make heirloom-quality pieces like the credenza behind them on the left.

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By Paige Yowell / World-Herald staff writer

Zongkers Custom Furniture creates the kind of pieces that can be passed down through generations.

Now its president, Dennis Zongker, who owns the business with his brother Dan, is passing down his knowledge — to his 22-year-old son, Eric, who works in the shop full-time; to area high school woodworking students; and to hobbyists and woodworkers everywhere through a new book from how-to publisher Taunton Press: “Wooden Boxes: Skill Building Techniques for Seven Unique Projects.”

Zongker said he sees the book as an expansion of the business, which the brothers started in 1989 and which has made its home for more than 20 years in the former Metz Brewery near Third and Hickory Streets.

Zongker said he'd been working on the boxes for about five years. Each has a theme or purpose — jewelry, coins, a music box, to name a few — and demonstrates specific techniques that can be used on any project.

It's simple, he says: Woodworking is his passion, and he wants to share it with others.

“I've taught so many people here at work and other places that it just comes natural for me.”

He's been teaching hand carving and other classes at Midwest Woodworkers, which sells woodworking tools and materials and offers woodworking classes, for about four years. He also judges high school students' projects at the end of every school year and offers tours of the shop to Omaha and Council Bluffs high schools.

“When you train (people), it makes you better,” he said.

Zongker has been training his son for years. Eric has been working there every summer since he was 13 and year-round for about three years.

“He's a natural woodworker,” his father said.

Eric Zongker had plans to be an architect but realized woodworking was his passion about a year after graduating from high school. He now works in the shop full time. The hope is that he someday might take his dad's place running the business. That's the way fathers and sons did it in the past, the elder Zongker said, but “now things get lost in time.”

The business has grown and its focus has shifted over the years, but much has remained the same.

Employing eight people, the business now has clients in 44 states.

Dan Zongker still works with clients in the design process — now all done with computers — and Dennis handles the engineering and billing. The company uses basic tools such as saws and chisels, but technology has opened many doors, simplifying the design process and allowing the firm to showcase products to the whole world through its website.

“It's Old World craftsmanship mixed with today's technology,” said Dan Zongker, noting that his brother is more of the old, using chisels and saws, while he's more technology-focused.

When the brothers began, about 95 percent of their business was from commercial clients — board room tables, desks and other office furniture. But as their reputation has grown, so have the number of individual clients looking for a nice piece of furniture, a built-in or a custom kitchen. Now about half of business is commercial clients and half furniture for homes, although it fluctuates from year to year, said Dan.

Dennis said he also does one or two intricate residential pieces a year, such as a coffee table with ball-and-claw lion's foot legs that will take 320 hours to complete, at \$45 per hour. He's working on that now.

“Everything we make will be an heirloom or last hundreds of years,” he said.

Zongkers' custom-designed video conferencing tables have been popular with NASA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the CIA and the FBI. "There's even one in the Pentagon," said Dan. The tables are split down the middle and have wheels on one end, allowing the table to split into a "V" shape to accommodate a screen.

The Zongkers got a U.S. General Services Administration schedule contract in 2006, establishing a long-term ability to bid for work with an array of federal agencies. The schedule serves as a vetted catalog for the agencies.

The shop also creates altars, lecterns and decorations for religious organizations.

In addition, the business contracts with the Henry Doorly Zoo, where the Zongkers have custom-built the zoo and aquarium gift shop displays and sales counters. They are now working on some decorative paneling and tabletops for the Tree Top Lounge.

"What we like about the zoo is it's so fun," said Dan. "They trust us and we trust them."

Sarpy County Chamber President Wendy Richey met Dan Zongker at a chamber event featuring a Zongkers-built bar for a business that was opening. She got to know the quality of the company's work and started the design process on a curio cabinet attached to a TV console for her home. She worked with him during the design process and finishing.

"I even got to know the guy who built it," she said. "How often do you get to know the guy who built your piece of furniture?"

While at the shop, she saw a jewelry box Dennis was working on — the same design displayed in his book — and bought it as a gift for her mother's 75th birthday.

"It's quite intricate and very delicate work. My mother was quite pleased," she said.

Over the past three years, the business has seen steady growth, about 20 percent each year. But 2008 and 2009 were "pretty scary," said Dan. "We made it through."

On a typical weekend, Dennis and his wife, Patti, who began working at Zongkers nine years ago as a corporate assistant, can be found in the shop, Dennis building or carving and Patti working on a new hobby: burning wood to create designs.

This Saturday, Dennis will display his boxes at the Woodworkers Art Show at Midwest Woodworkers, 14605 Wright St., from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., where signed copies of the book will be available for pre-order.

"I basically live for it, breathe for it," he said.

http://www.omaha.com/money/omaha-woodworking-firm-spreads-its-expertise-to-a-new-how/article_b909ed87-64d4-5fbf-976b-7a4581b57934.html#omaha-woodworking-firm-spreads-its-expertise-to-a-new-how-to-book