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MANUFACTURING



Dan Smith

President Joe Hallock (seated) and CEO Gregg Weinschreider

SleepSafe Beds wide awake and growing

'Wood guys' make a 'hospital bed' using high- and low-tech that is a whole lot more appealing than anything in a hospital

By Keith Ferrell

The furniture facility filled with state-of-the art, computer-driven, laser-cutting machines stands beside the Blackwater River in Callaway, high in the Franklin County hills. The facility's spacious—and expanding—interior carries the scent of freshly milled oak, maple, cherry—and of freshly made espresso and, midday, of gourmet meals prepared for the staff of seven.

Welcome to SleepSafe Beds.

Relocated to Franklin County three years ago from upstate New York, the company's founders—CEO Gregg Weinschreider and President Joe Hallock—were drawn to rural Virginia by, among other things, its similarity to their original

location.

"It reminds us of where we used to live," Hallock says. "Except it doesn't snow as much. There's a good pool of employees here from the furniture industry, and the cost of doing business is considerably less than New York state."

The company was started in 2001 with the goal of creating and manufacturing safer—and more aesthetically appealing—beds for special needs patients such as children with cerebral palsy, adults with loss of muscular control, and other conditions that can restrict patients to bed for up to 23 hours a day. The loss of motor control can often result in constant stress on the bed and, of course, the potential

for harm to the patient.

SleepSafe's founders sought to overcome both problems with their product.

The challenge

Having set themselves the goal of creating such a bed, furniture and woodworking craftsmen and longtime friends Weinschreider and Hallock also discovered the challenge of creating a company. In both cases they went about things "their way."

And in both cases, against long odds, they've succeeded admirably.

Working their way through various prototypes and early production models of the bed, Weinschreider and Hallock found themselves immediately applying every lesson learned, improving and re-designing (and in some ways reinventing) the bed during the manufactur-

ing process itself.

The bed that resulted—still evolving, still being improved—found a market that was not only ready for such a product, but also enormously grateful for it.

Before SleepSafe's arrival, families' and caregivers' bedding selections were often limited to traditional hospital beds—inappropriate and in many ways dangerous for the patient whose involuntary movements may result in appendages becoming entrapped—or what were essentially metal or mesh-enclosed cribs.

As New Orleans native Sue Plaisance, SleepSafe's director of sales and marketing, points out, "A hospital bed only offers those articulating features [the ability to raise and lower the mattress] without the additional safety features we offer. Hospital beds aren't governed by the

FDA. Our beds by far exceed FDA guidelines."

The company's marketing materials emphasize all of these safety features, but also reflect SleepSafe's commitment to a stylish as well as functional product: "A bedroom isn't a hospital room, and it shouldn't look like one," is a key component of SleepSafe's marketing literature.

"We're wood guys," Weinschreider says, "why would we want to make another hospital bed?"

Technology

Achieving that level of quality, safety and—unlike most patient-related furniture—aesthetic appeal, has guided the company to continue its development and refinement process. Indeed, the innovations and improvements, as constant a part of the company's culture as its production line, currently deliver more than 60 beds a month.

For all of Weinschreider's and Hallock's understanding of traditional wood craftsmanship, their understanding and embrace of the highest technologies in modern furniture making—and, once the facility expansion is completed, metal-working for the bed frames—is essential to their success, and the success of their product.

"In today's world you've got to have the machinery," Weinschreider says. "You can't put eight guys out there any more to do what a machine can do."

"Technology allows us to operate at a very fast growth rate," Plaisance says, "without sacrificing quality or craftsmanship."

Hallock points out that throughout SleepSafe's history the company has invested in the best current technology, rather than purchasing reconditioned or older machines. Having the latest tools enables SleepSafe to operate at full capacity, both without worrying about the breakdowns and maintenance issues older equipment carries with it, and without building up a large—and expensive—inventory of parts and components. The beds' elements are milled as needed.

Increasingly successful in their original facility in upstate New York, the company's

founders increasingly found themselves dealing with both unavoidable aspects of the location—harsh winters and exceptionally heavy heating costs—and the multiple levels of bureaucracy that can hamper or even crush a growing but still small business.

They looked south for a suitable site for relocation.

"Part of our location selection was a wood thing," Weinschreider says. "We wanted to be close to good sources of maple, oak, cherry. The farther south you get the farther you are from maple and cherry. You can of course have it shipped, but we didn't want that."

They looked in North and South Carolina, but found drawbacks there. "North Carolina is growing so much that it'll be just like New York state in five years in terms of taxes and regulations," Weinschreider says with a laugh.

Virginia wins

Virginia, then, was the state of choice. A Google search for commercial properties in the state turned up the former Blackwater Doors facility in Callaway. A meeting with Scott Martin, the county's director of commerce and leisure services, further impressed them, as did the area's pool of skilled furniture workers.

A deal was struck and by late summer 2003 SleepSafe was in Franklin County.

And in production: "Our tools arrived in July and within three weeks we were producing beds here," Hallock recalls. And renovating the facility itself. "When we got here, there weren't any phone lines," Weinschreider says.

After installing phone lines, upgraded lighting and power lines, dust collection and other wood and metal-work specific technologies, the company enhanced its quality of work as well its ability to do quality work, adding a spacious and remarkably well-equipped kitchen where the company gathers for gourmet meals every day.

The owners and employees enjoy the beauty of their location, but are also learning some of the lessons that seclusion imposes even on high-tech-equipped companies in this high-tech information age.

"We can't get cell phone service here because of the hills," Weinschreider notes. "Getting AEP to provide the service upgrades we need takes more time than it should."

Nor is high-speed broadband Internet

service at their location. Like many companies in rural areas, SleepSafe is limited to HughesNet satellite connections and, like most satellite Internet customers, it suffers from the restrictions on service that satellite providers impose.

"Probably we'll have to move into town at some point," Hallock says.

That point is a few years off. By adding the metal-working tools needed to bring their frame-making in-house, SleepSafe expects to grow to nine and possibly 11 employees by the end of the year.

'Love it here'

For the most part, the company's founders are pleased to be doing their growing in Franklin County. "We love it here," says Weinschreider.

And even as they continue to love the area, they also see some aspects of the county reminding them more of New York than they wish.

"More bureaucracy, less common sense," Hallock says, "more 'you have to do things this way' rather than the traditional understanding of how to get things done."

Some of



David Brooks attaches T-molding to a bed part

that change, they suggest, may be a result of other arrivals from the north, residents who've located primarily to the Smith Mountain Lake area, then gotten involved in local politics with the goal of changing the way the simple Southerners who've always managed the county and its business and building regulations do things.

"I'm concerned that the county is heading toward regulation for the sake of regulation, just because that's how it's done in other major municipalities," Weinschreider says. "The risk is that they [county administration] will be standing around 15 years from now saying, 'What happened?'"

"We moved from New York to here. There's nothing saying that 15 years from now we won't pack up from Franklin County and move again."

For now, though, SleepSafe is staying put—and moving forward as it does so.

(Keith Ferrell is a Franklin County-based freelance writer.)



Jason Cooper operates the CNC machine, the high-tech component of drilling out the wood pieces of beds