

# Dreaming of Going Pro?

## Five recipes for success in a difficult business

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

Once you've taken a few sweet shavings with a well-tuned plane, cut a few tight-fitting dovetails, and built a few sturdy cabinets or cradles admired by friends and family, it's probably inevitable that the thought occurs: Could I make a living doing this?

The answer is, probably not—at least, not the kind of living you're used to. The math is despairingly simple. Building extremely labor-intensive objects in an era of extremely high labor costs results in prohibitive prices.

It's been evident since the craft's revival started some 50 years ago that even for the most talented furniture makers, it's a struggle to make a living. And in the wake of the economic meltdown of 2008, which seemed to target furniture makers with special force, an already bleak picture got even grimmer.

And yet ... the desire for fulfillment in one's work, the passion and the pleasure to be found in working wood continue to prove irresistible to some, overcoming cold-eyed assessments of profit and loss.

Those who try the rough waters and succeed seem to arrive at designs for their businesses that are as various as their styles of furniture. One thing that unites them is a willingness to work at the business as hard as they do at the bench.

I've collected a handful of exemplary ones here. Best of luck!

*Jonathan Binzen, a senior editor, worked in two shops that folded soon after he left. Coincidence?*

### Online Extra

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**Think local.** Tom Throop set up his shop in downtown New Canaan, Conn., aiming to be as convenient as possible to a prosperous clientele.

## TOM THROOP The Local Craftsman

When Tom Throop was looking for a furniture-making school in the late 1980s, the Connecticut native chose John Makepeace's Parnham College in Dorset, England, because the program was geared toward making a successful business as well as beautiful furniture. "I got into this to make a life—and to make a living," Throop says. "The two things go hand in hand."

These days, Throop works in a one-man shop tucked just off the bustling downtown shopping streets of New Canaan, Conn. Early in his career, Throop shared shops with other furniture makers in out-of-the-way industrial buildings. He enjoyed the camaraderie with fellow craftsmen, but felt cut off from customers. So when he decided to set up a solo shop, he bought a building right in the heart of New Canaan, where he'd be visible and accessible to potential clients. "I plunked myself down into a population that can afford my work," he says.

"It's been a 20-year evolution for me,"

Throop says of his

career, "and it hasn't been

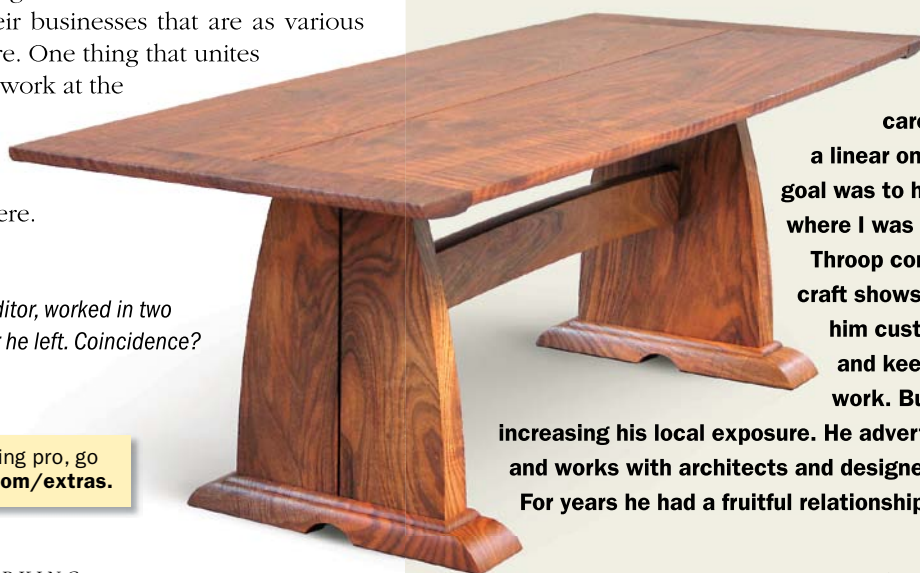
a linear one. But from the start my

goal was to have a shop in a town where I was the local furniture maker."

Throop continues to do several craft shows each year, which garners him customers from elsewhere and keeps him designing fresh work. But he works hardest at

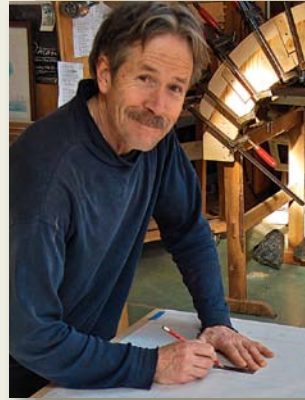
increasing his local exposure. He advertises in local publications and works with architects and designers active in the area.

For years he had a fruitful relationship with a nearby gallery,



## GEOFF WARNER

# One Piece Leads the Way



Maine furniture maker Geoffrey Warner calls the downturn of 2008 “a serendipitous event.” It forced him, after 25 years in business, “to work really hard and think really creatively.” Warner, who studied under Tage Frid at Rhode Island School of Design, had spent his career building custom furniture and custom kitchens. As he saw the economy shifting, Warner had two thoughts: “How can

I address this in terms of my survival? And can I do that by building something really affordable—not just for the wealthy, who have always been my clientele?” He set out to design something attractive and as simple as possible. Scanning the history of furniture, he focused on the three-legged stool, “the fastest way of putting legs onto a seat.”

By the spring of 2009, Warner had his first batch of finished Owl Stools—and they immediately began to sell. To keep the stool as inexpensive as possible, he had the seats carved by a CNC shop, and he had another shop turn the legs. Assembly, finishing, and shipping were handled in-house. Warner also offered the stools in kit form, and held workshops where people could assemble their stool kits.

As sales through shows and his website continued to surge—doubling from 170 stools in 2011 to 360 in 2012—Warner and a business consultant created a plan for selling the stools wholesale through reps and retailers. To make the wholesale model work, Warner had to raise prices dramatically, and sales through his website slowed.

“This is a risky experiment,” Warner acknowledges. The growth of his business is exciting, he says, but with new employees, subcontractors, and consultants, it can also seem chaotic and unsettling. Speaking of the days when he did one commission at a time, he muses, “It used to be so seat-of-the-pants and easy.”

**Wholesale change.** Warner spent his whole career building custom furniture and kitchens, but since 2008 he’s successfully marketed a line of stools, which he next intends to sell wholesale.



**The Throop Gallery ... temporarily.** When he finds a vacant storefront downtown, Throop sets up shows of his furniture until a tenant is found.

but it closed several years ago, leaving no prominent local venue for showing his work. So he took matters into his own hands. Now every year or two he creates his own pop-up gallery. If he sees a well-located storefront for rent, he’ll propose a deal to the landlord: In exchange for use of the space until a new tenant is found, Throop will spruce it up and turn it into his own personal gallery, filling it with his furniture. He’s done it several times now with notable success.

Throop produces superbly designed and crafted furniture, but that’s only half his job. “Selling the work is a big aspect of what I do,” he says. “I’m often asked, ‘After putting so much care into a piece, do you have trouble letting it go?’ No! I like making the stuff, but I like selling it, too. They’re two parts of the same equation—it’s electrifying to make something and then sell it.”



**JEFF MILLER**  
**Diversify and Thrive**

**Writer, teacher, furniture maker.** Miller began writing and teaching in part to rekindle his passion for wood-working. Years later, these secondary pursuits carried him through the recession.

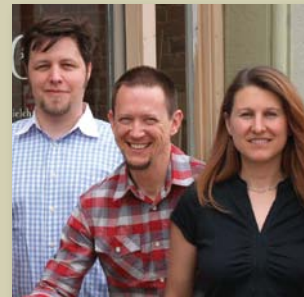


By the mid-1990s, Chicago furniture maker Jeff Miller had been working wood for a decade. He had plenty of work but was growing frustrated with his career. “It seemed the only way to make more money was to work more hours,” he says. And with two young children, he could no longer put in the enormous overtime he had relied on to build his business. At the same time, Miller, a Yale graduate with a brief previous career playing classical music, wanted a work life that was “more challenging, more diverse, and more mentally stimulating.”

He considered a career change, but chose instead to stick with furniture making and start writing about the craft as well as practicing it. At about the same time, he began holding weekend classes in his shop and elsewhere in the Chicago area.

Furniture making continued to provide the lion’s share of his income, but writing and teaching gave his career the added depth and interest he was seeking. When 2008 arrived, Miller’s supplemental activities took on added importance. Most of his furniture commissions dried up, but with a reputation earned through three books and dozens of articles, he was able to greatly expand his teaching, giving workshops at schools, guilds, and woodworking clubs across the country. Prior to 2008, Miller made 70% to 80% of his income from furniture making and the balance from writing and teaching. By 2012, for the first time, teaching and writing produced more than half of his income.

Miller feels that writing and teaching saved his career twice—first by making it more complex and interesting, and later by providing the financial flexibility to continue in hard economic times. There are other options, Miller says, to writing and teaching. “You could design for industry, do furniture repair, restore antiques, sell wood, or build other people’s designs. But I think that finding a way of branching out and diversifying on your strengths is a necessary adjunct for survival as a woodworker.”



**A good balance.** Frederick (left) and Chaffin (center) have moved from building furniture to designing and marketing it. Edgington (right) handles the books.



## DAN CHAFFIN & MATT FREDERICK Creative Partnership

With its light-filled bench room at the front, well-equipped machine room at the back, and airy design studio upstairs, Dan Chaffin and Matt Frederick's handsome shop in downtown Louisville, Ky., seems an ideal place to work wood. And their six-person company's output—stylish and soundly crafted built-ins and solid-wood furniture—is equally impressive. But if the bustling business has the air of inevitability about it, perhaps it shouldn't. Just eight years ago the building was “a terrifying wreck,” and Chaffin and Frederick, having recently picked up woodworking as a hobby, were entirely untutored in the craft. Building commissions for friends, they worked in a cramped, low-ceilinged, often-flooded basement with a scavenged assortment of tools and machines.

What the pair lacked in woodworking experience and training, however, they compensated for with energy and a history of creative collaboration. Friends since grade school, they had played in bands together and after college founded a company that specialized in editing video and composing music for soundtracks. After building several commissions, they decided to take their woodworking business full-time. Along with Chaffin's wife, Amy Edgington, who is a partner in the business and handles accounting and public relations, they bought a three-story brick shell and spent a year renovating it while Frederick kept some money coming in through the video company.

For the first three years, Chaffin and Frederick designed and built kitchens and other cabinetry as well as freestanding furniture, a mixture they maintain today. Even as the economy went south, business was good. “We had so much work that we were snowed under at times,” Chaffin says. “The scale of the projects was increasing and we were working very long hours to get jobs done.”

So they decided to hire employees. True to their bootstrap backgrounds, they didn't go looking for highly trained craftsmen. “We were hiring for temperament, not experience,” Chaffin explains, “and they picked up the craft quickly.” Now, with three craftsmen working for them, Chaffin and Frederick devote their time to design, marketing, and running the business.

They would like the company to focus entirely on making furniture, but the economics are bruising. “With custom furniture you're creating something that's never been built before—it's very difficult to do that profitably. It takes a long time to refine a design—and more time to work out how to make it efficiently.” So they are planning to start building furniture in batches and selling it through retail stores. Other makers have struggled to establish a retail market for their furniture, but I wouldn't bet against this team finding a creative way to make it work.



**Dream shop downtown.** Chaffin and Frederick, who switched careers from video production to woodworking, renovated an abandoned building in Louisville. They set up their workshop on the ground floor and a design studio upstairs. Eight years in, they employ three craftsmen to do the building and concentrate their own time on design and marketing.



## DON GREEN One-Man Factory

Don Green's furniture is a marriage of elegance and efficiency. Green, who has a one-man shop, has the eye of a designer, the skill of a craftsman, and the whip-cracking practicality of a factory foreman. He may work alone, but he builds like a team, producing large stacks of parts and making his pieces in production runs. He avoids custom work, instead selling from a series of pieces designed as a cohesive line of furniture.

Green sees no reason why a good craftsman shouldn't also be a good businessman. His furniture carries a clear message of fine craftsmanship, but he doesn't want to suffer financially for it. "I make concessions," he says. "The minute I go to hand tools, I can't make any money. So I design based on how close I can get to a finished piece right off the machine." When he's designing a piece, he says, "I edit out processes that are too time-consuming." Too much finicky work, he says, "will bury you."

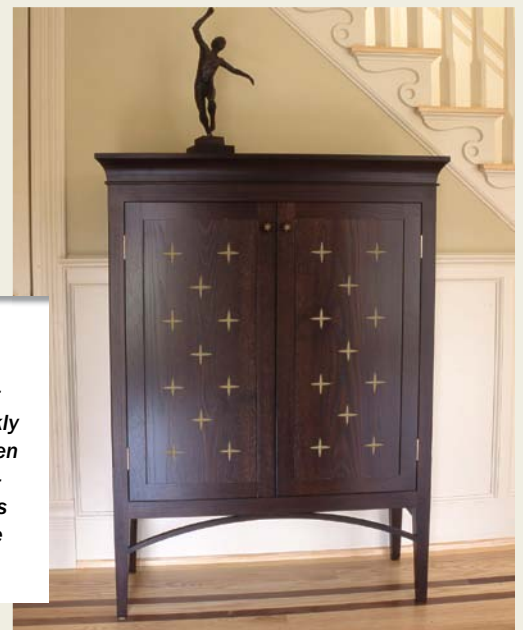
Efficiency begins at the drawing board. While conjuring a design that he hopes will be aesthetically successful, Green is guided not just by concerns about how he will produce it, but even how he will ship it. "Often, I design around the size of the UPS box," he says. Green begins the design process on paper, then builds full-scale mockups using 2x4s and sheetrock screws. A design doesn't get finalized, though, until he has built it a few times and made adjustments based on how his concept really goes together.

Green's wife, Jenifer, runs the sales and marketing side of their business—Greentree Home—from the hilltop Victorian house Don restored in Delhi, N.Y. Jen ships inventory, handles client contact, runs their outstanding website, and takes the furniture to shows. She also augments their income with a bustling business in custom candles and small accessories.

Speaking of his furniture, Don says, "We're tuned in to what I can sell. Our marketing plan used to be, 'If I make it, they will come.' But that really is a field of dreams."



**He's a tough boss.** Green works alone but operates like a team, building furniture in batches and keeping processes as efficient and economical as possible.



**Fast furniture.** So that he can build his elegant designs as quickly as possible, Green minimizes hand-work and prefers not to customize his pieces.