

Bay Trader improvises during pandemic

Birdhouses help keep family furniture business in the black

Bay Trader

Skip and Mary Wilson, owners
10555 Sandridge Rd., Long Beach
360-642-2664

Story and Photos by Luke Whittaker

Coast River Business Journal
lwhittaker@crbizjournal.com

LONG BEACH — A few birdhouses still rest on the porch railing outside a family furniture business along Sandridge Road in Long Beach.

Hundreds of the simple \$10 cedar birdhouses have already sold in recent weeks, a testament to a community committed to rallying around a business that was forced to close amid the coronavirus pandemic.

“Everybody who knows or has ever done business with us must have bought a birdhouse,” said Mary Wilson, who has owned and operated the new and used Bay Trader furniture store with her husband Skip since 1997.

“It was very heartwarming,” she said.

Non-essential businesses flounder amid closures

In March Gov. Jay Inslee’s “Stay Home, Stay Safe” order closed non-essential businesses in Washington to help slow the spread of the covid-19 virus. It meant the immediate closure for small businesses like Skip and Mary’s, a first in their nearly 25 years of operation.

“We shut down with everything else,” Skip said. “We were closed for a couple months or so.”

While the doors of the business were closed, Mary posted on a community Facebook page and on their storefront sign that the business was still offering birdhouses for sale out front, including a can for collecting the money. Soon the orders came pouring in, exceeding their usual amount by more than 300%.

“It was truly amazing the support we got. It was all self-service. Every day there was money in the can,” Mary said.

The income, a few thousand dollars, was slight compared to the sales the business normally does, but the constant money helped keep the business in the black during a difficult time.

“It was the only thing we had going at the time,” Skip said. “It was interesting that we sold so many more this year being closed, people just put money in the can. To the credit of human nature, we only had 2 out of 300 that people didn’t pay for.”

The birdhouses, each made by a Ron Clark in Astoria, are usually a steady sale in the spring and summer, but never sold as briskly before.

“We’ve sold in the neighborhood of 300, triple the amount we usually sell (in a year),” Skip said.

Many bought birdhouses as part of backyard projects to keep busy with during the pandemic, others saw them as potential craft painting projects for kids.

“One lady bought 24,” Skip said.

IKEA, Wayfair.com sap sales for family furniture business

Much of the furniture inside Bay Trader was made by Skip himself. In a shop in the back of the building Skip spends a few hours each day working on his latest project, often tables. In recent months Skip has begun to experiment with simple handmade furniture as a way to compete with online retailers who offer discount furniture.

The increasing demand for cheaply-made furniture and home furnishings from internet retailers such as Wayfair.com and IKEA have had a direct impact on the small family businesses like Bay Trader.

“The competition for me is the internet, because there’s all kinds of wooden tables,” Skip said.

Less scrupulous buyers may be unaware of the product they’re actually getting online versus in person, Skip explained.

“The problem is if you put out a table that’s all wood versus one you can buy online that’s made of chipboard. The person that’s standing here looking online doesn’t know that it’s chipboard and they’re much cheaper than the wood ones. It makes it hard to compete with the internet.”

Chipboard, also known as particleboard, has become increasingly common in mass-produced furniture.

It is typically the least expensive material that can be used for manufacturing furniture with a lower cost than other types of engineered woods or plywood.

Skip has started making simple hat racks as a low-risk investment. The business also sells wooden bird feeders, repurposed license plates bent into ‘stars’ and spiral wind spinners, all made by local artisans.

In a backroom of the business, there are dozens of tables and desks, many bought from auction houses and Army surplus over the years. Like a mad carpenter, Skip breathes new life into the forgotten furniture using saws, sanders and stain. He often swaps tabletops and legs and disassembles and re-engineers underwhelming pieces into inspired furniture. Among his latest creations is a unique vertical desk made by seamlessly combining two outdated smaller stands. The result is a modern piece of furniture with multiple functions.

“I took something that I bought fairly reasonable and made something that’s pretty handy to have, women love a lingerie chest like that,” Skip said.



Skip Wilson details the furniture making process in his shop on Thursday, June 25 in Long Beach.



Cedar birdhouses for sale rest on the front porch railing at Bay Trader in Long Beach. The \$10 birdhouses were the sole source of income for the business for several months as it was closed after Gov. Jay Inslee’s “Stay Home, Stay Safe,” order in March. The business sold several times over what they typically do.