



TODD COOPER

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# Sinking into Softness

Robb’s Pillow Furniture invites rest.

By Aria Seligmann

If you’ve ever been to the Oregon Country Fair, you know Robb Bokich’s wares. He’s at booth number 73, and when you’re that far down on the loop, hot, dusty, and tired, Robb’s Pillow Furniture is so inviting, you just have to sink yourself into it.

There is a time limit for sitting though, says Bokich’s wife, Emily Wille. “Robb’s better at telling people than I am,” she says. “He’ll gently tell someone time’s up for sitting and to come back later.”

Bokich has been selling his pillow furniture at the Country Fair for 30 years. What makes his furniture unique is his process of working with the foam. He invented and patented the way it’s cut.

“The way I cut it makes it different in size, shape and texture than that used in other filling, and because of that it creates more airspace around itself, giving each chair incredible support,” he says. The foam is cut to produce many edges, which not only makes it malleable to each person’s shape, but also prevents it from breaking down over time.

Bokich covers each piece of furniture — love seats, raindrop chairs, futons, pillows and footrests — with high quality upholstery made of nylon fibers so tightly woven they don’t absorb dirt.

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He demonstrates how to re-fluff and sit in the furniture inside his workspace at 1851 River Road (which also houses Wille’s Lavendar Corner gift shop).

“Here, try this,” he says, as he tugs and prods at each piece. “Now it’s a chair; now it’s a loveseat. Lift up your feet,” he says as he places a matching footrest under your feet, a pillow behind your head, and another pillow on your lap. “Now you’ve got a reading desk,” he laughs.

The chairs are so comfortable and supportive they take tension away from the back, creating a feeling of floating.

As he moves around showing off his furniture and pointing out different types of upholstery, Bokich has a noticeable limp and uses only one arm. At age 16, he was asleep in the back seat of a car when it was struck by a drunk driver. He came out of a coma three months later, with limited brain function and no feeling on the left side of his body. His 14-year-old sister was killed in the crash; the driver had her legs severed. The drunk driver and his passenger were both killed.

“In an instant, that split decision made by that driver, that choice he made, affected so many lives,” says Bokich.

Despite the severity of his injury, Bokich left home on his own a year after the accident and traveled around the world. “I learned to speak again in the Philippines,” he says. He then came to Oregon to go to school, earning his bachelor’s in psychology and master’s in counseling.

But while in school, he needed to support himself financially, and no one would hire him with his disability. Then he saw someone making big pillows and wanted to give it a try.

“He said, ‘Oh you can’t do this, it takes two hands.’”

Bokich laughed at him.

“The doctors told my parents I wouldn’t live. Then they told me I would never walk again. I told the guy, ‘I think I can handle making pillows.’”

He sold his first pillow furniture at Saturday Market in 1973 and has been sewing ever since. His inventory has grown to be broader and to serve the desires of his customers. From the first raindrop chair designs to the more recent futons and raindrop beds, everything is custom made.

After 12 years of making pillow furniture, someone from a hospital in Idaho saw it and was so impressed with the comfort, he asked Bokich to make beds for his patients. Bokich spent another three years designing and testing a higher level of foam to be used for medical furniture. “For a person who’s physically damaged, the most important thing is to be able to sleep comfortably,” says Bokich.

A clinic in Illinois has also started to use his furniture for clients undergoing occupational therapy. The therapist can sit in the furniture with the client, or the client can relax sitting alone, says Bokich. “One therapist said he’s never seen his clients come into therapy smiling before.”

Bokich’s eyes light up when he talks about helping others. “It’s an exciting thing to give someone comfort and joy.”

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