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**2008  
Small Shop  
of the Year**

**Pride in its work and respect  
for its employees take CabFab's  
business to new heights**

**Randall Reilly™**

**IWF 2008 PREVIEW**

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**CUSTOM CLOSET COMPANY  
RESPONDS TO CHANGING DEMANDS**

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**HOW TO AVOID COLOR VARIATIONS  
DURING SANDING AND FINISHING**



Attention to detail, such as the grain-matched drawer fronts and cabinet doors seen here, is a hallmark of CabFab's work quality.

**CabFab, Modern Woodworking's 2008 Small Shop of the Year, balances newfound successes in commercial market with its original vision for residential customers**

# Staying the course

By Jeff Crissey



*Chris and Carolyn Clemans, CabFab owners*

In late 2004, Chris and Carolyn Clemans set out to introduce their high-end custom cabinetry business, Old Forge, N.Y.-based Backwoods Fine Woodworking, to a broader market. Looking for property that would allow for a showroom to attract retail traffic and house a manufacturing facility, the couple bought a 30,000-sq. ft. building in Syracuse in February 2005 and founded The Cabinet Fabrication Group.

Better known today as CabFab, the Syracuse operation primarily manufactures cabinet boxes for kitchen and bath cabinetry commercial casework and entertainment centers, complemented by the Old Forge operation that continues to produce hand-crafted components. To produce cabinet boxes, the company invested in a CNC router to increase production capacity.

"When we were opening the Syracuse location, we had arrived at the point that it didn't make sense to cut our boxes out on a sliding table saw any longer," says Chris. "We had explored CNC in Old Forge, but nobody wanted to deliver material up there. Here, I have six vendors that can bring me plywood in half an hour if I need it."

Although Chris and Carolyn founded CabFab exclusively as a provider of residential casework and millwork, it wasn't long before commercial customers began to call on the company, which completed its first commercial cabinetry project (two dentist offices) for a nearby design-build firm.

"It was the first thing that we could do completely in-house here in Syracuse, so it was attractive to us because we didn't have to move production between here and Old Forge," says Chris. "We're trying to let the marketplace know that we are a boutique supplier in the commercial market. We want to be the guy they call to do specialty work. We aren't set up to



**CabFab manufactures high-end cabinetry and millwork in upstate New York using a wide variety of wood species.**



### **CabFab company snapshot**

**Founded: 1987 as Backwoods Fine Woodworking**

**Employees: 13**

**2007 annual volume: \$1.1 million**

knock out plastic laminate boxes all day long because we're not set up for high-volume work."

About the same time, CabFab threw its name in the hat for a large casino project in the area. The company's product quality quickly cemented CabFab as the primary millwork supplier for the casino, and it has developed an ongoing relationship as the casino converts itself from a gambling center to a resort destination. In 2007, the casino client accounted for roughly \$500,000 in revenue, nearly half of the company's annual total.

Chris says that although CabFab's commercial work has increased, the company has to stay grounded to the residential customer base. "The bigger reality is reminding ourselves that we can't get away from our core business while we're working for commercial

SHOWROOM



*CabFab took advantage of special government programs and grants to remodel its dual-purpose showroom and production facility in Syracuse, N.Y.*



## Searching for a home

At the turn of the 20th century, the corridor stretching across upstate New York – from Buffalo in the west to Syracuse and Albany in the east – was a hotbed of industry and manufacturing when the Erie Canal served as a major shipping route. As transportation methods evolved over the years, businesses moved away and the once-proud buildings and factories in towns that dot the New York State Thruway fell into disrepair.

In an effort to stimulate economic growth in decaying areas, in 1986 the state of New York created the Empire Zone program, offering incentives for businesses willing to move in and renovate buildings. **Looking for any financial aid they could find as they founded CabFab, Chris and Carolyn Clemans purchased an old four-story brick building at 124 Burnet Avenue in Syracuse that qualified for the program.**

Originally built in 1896 as a brass foundry, the building was renovated over the course of six months at a cost of \$500,000. In return for its investment, **CabFab receives property tax benefits and sales tax breaks, as well as a discount on its electricity bill as long as the company continues to add to the area's job base.**

Today, the building is a fully modern facility with a highly automated work cell for panel processing and an **efficient assembly area. The iron beams above CabFab's new showroom space, once used to transport smelted**

brass from the furnace to the molds, are the only remaining evidence of the building's past. The showroom offers customers a glimpse of the cabinet build quality and the exacting standards that Chris and his staff demand of themselves. Each display showcases the company's capabilities ranging from Mission style to Contemporary.

In addition to the Empire Zone program, CabFab met with its power company, who determined the cabinet shop qualified for two dollar-for-dollar programs, including a \$25,000 infrastructure improvement program and a \$50,000 grant for energy efficiency. CabFab made energy-saving choices in the kind of light fixtures it installed, a radiant floor heating system, motion sensors on lighting and a high-efficiency variable speed compressor.

"Agencies weren't just knocking on the door saying, 'Here's a check,'" says Carolyn. "We had to meet with the right people and describe to them what we were looking to do."

customers. The challenge is dealing with the question, 'Do we follow what appears to be the easy road even if it doesn't fit our original mission?' It is a work in progress to step back and really look at it."

To keep its CNC router and edgebander busy, CabFab seeks out other cabinet shops looking to outsource box production. It also serves as a cut-band-bore operation for California Closets, which shares a portion of the company's showroom.

"With our California Closets business and our own custom work, our router is as busy as anyone's on a single shift," says Chris, who estimates the router is operational 30 hours in a 40-hour week.

### A modest beginning

Woodworking began as a hobby for Chris, who founded Backwoods Fine Woodworking in 1987, to make wholesale and retail wood craft products. The business remained a one-man operation until 1998, when he realized he would have to invest and enter the woodworking profession full time if he wanted the business to grow.

"When I founded Backwoods Fine Woodworking, it was a classic 'don't-quit-your-day-job' business," recalls Chris. "I named it Backwoods because it was literally a little shop in the middle of the woods – 1,100 square feet with no heat and no bathroom."

That same year, Chris developed a two-page business plan, took out a bank loan and hired his first two employees, Hans Schmid and Sandy Tetreault (both of whom are still with the company today). In 2001, Chris bought a lot and built a 4,000-sq. ft. shop and added a sliding table saw, small edgebander and 22-spindle line boring machine.

Today, Backwoods Fine Woodworking is a completely modern shop that makes cabinet doors, drawer fronts, custom components and intricate radius work for CabFab's high-end clientele. Although separated by 95 miles, Backwoods is remotely linked with CabFab in Syracuse, allowing both groups to log on to the same server to discuss job details and work on production simultaneously.

Chris and Carolyn's respective backgrounds make the couple well-suited for running the operation. Carolyn manages the business finances, while Chris handles creative design and production. "Some of the things that create tension between us are also things that make this company very viable," says Chris. "If either of us were to own a company of this size on our own, I don't think we'd be successful. We very much complement each other, although I don't necessarily recommend it as a marriage counseling move," he jokes.

### In the shop

When designing the layout for its Syracuse facility in 2005, CabFab applied lean manufacturing principles and created a production flow that works well in a small area. Established relationships with vendors allow the company to take quick delivery of raw material and supplies on a daily basis and reduce inventory in the receiving area. CabFab invested in material handling where possible to reduce the number of times a part is handled manually and to keep labor costs down. A vacuum lift and return conveyor allow one operator to run both the CNC router and edgebander simultaneously with minimal strain.



**Backwoods Fine Woodworking, CabFab's hand-crafted wood products division, makes cabinet doors, drawer fronts, custom components and intricate radius work for high-end clientele.**

## The faces of CabFab

Chris and Carolyn Clemans know their business is only as good as its employees. The couple goes the extra step to create a worker-friendly atmosphere for their 11-person staff. "When we started this business, we knew that if we have to live here more than we live at home, we better love where we are, love what we're doing and love the people we work with," says Carolyn. "Our employees make us, and we try to treat them like family."

Over the years, the company has added health insurance, retirement plans and flexible hours for its employees. It even switched from five eight-hour work weeks to four 10-hour weeks by democratic vote on the production floor. "If you work at a big company and something comes up outside of work, that becomes an issue," says Amie Delson, purchasing and billing manager. "Here they understand you have to be happy outside of work to be happy at work."

**"When we started this business, we knew that if we have to live here more than we live at home, we better love where we are, love what we're doing and love the people we work with."**

*- Carolyn Clemans*

CabFab's approach to employees has allowed it to attract and retain a staff that works well together. Hans Schmid and Sandy Tetreault, Chris's first two employees at Backwoods Fine Woodworking in Old Forge, N.Y., have been with the company since 1998.

"We pay well and we offer good benefits, and that allows us to be picky when it comes to hiring," says Chris.

The company recently received a shot in the arm on the wage front when the state of New York cut its workers compensation rates more than 30 percent, lowering the company's rate from 11 percent to 6.75 percent. "There has been a lot of discussion about New York not being a business-friendly state because of high taxes, high energy rates and insurance," says Chris. "A lot of manufacturers were relocating to the Southeast U.S. where states have pro-business climates." CabFab recognizes the important roles its employees play in the business, and the Clemans' approach to their staff is a big reason why the company is a success today.



**Sandy Tetreault, production manager**

"At Backwoods Fine Woodworking, we handle all the solid wood and custom work. I come down to Syracuse at the start of a job and go over what is involved and what hardware is required, and then I'll keep the guys rolling on building the boxes."



**Scott Hoehn, designer**

"I meet with walk-in customers who come into the showroom here in Syracuse. I work on designs for them and assist Chris when he doesn't have time to do drawings for his clients."



**Amie Delson, purchasing and billing manager**

"I do anything from answering the phone to reconciling invoices, and I handle the purchasing and billing for specific jobs."



**Gary Bartlett, CNC operator**

"I'm the first step in the process, cutting and edgbanding parts for boxes. Half of what I cut is for Cab Fab, and the other half is for California Closets."



**Jody Kirk, assembler**

"I take over where Gary leaves off, cleaning parts and prepping them for assembly. My focus is box construction and quality control before the boxes are assembled."

"It's easy to justify a return conveyor if you look at the numbers," says Chris. "For me to put a guy at the end of the edgebander to catch parts, it is pointless. Same thing with the vacuum lift – why have them load the router manually? For us, it was easy to crunch the numbers and see that it makes sense."

After cutting and banding, parts are sorted by job and moved on carts from the work cell and assembly area. "If I see a guy walking with a part for more than three steps, I let him know about it," says Chris.

The assembly area is a carbon copy of the one at the company's Old Forge facility. The purchasing manager pulls all the hardware that corresponds with the particular job and delivers a spec sheet that answers any of the assembler's questions regarding special millwork, hardware locations, etc.

As CabFab continues to grow into new markets, the company stays grounded in what got it where it is today — pride in its work, respect for its employees and an appreciation for the original customer base on which the business was built. **MW**



**2009** MODERN WOODWORKING **SMALL SHOP** Of The Year

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successfully managed their companies through the ups and downs of the woodworking industry. These owners exemplify the highest standards of woodworking professionals, including business acumen, marketing and production management expertise, attention to safety and community involvement.

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each 2009 Small Shop of the Year finalist company will be featured in a two-page article in Modern Woodworking.

**TO BE CONSIDERED...**  
you will need to fill out the application form available at [www.modernwoodworking.com](http://www.modernwoodworking.com) and submit it by August 31, 2008. Return the completed form to Small Shop of the Year, c/o Jeff Crissey, 3200 Rice Mine Road NE, Tuscaloosa, AL 35406; or fax it to (205) 391-2081.

This contest is limited to woodworking companies with \$2 million or less current annual revenues.

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