

BUSINESS

He grew from garage to groundbreaker

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Written By: Nathan Hansen | Mar 31st 2010 - 7am.



Thelen Cabinets was the first business to move to the industrial park in 1990. It was another two or three years before another building moved in. Currently it occupies an 18,000 square foot building.

Back in his earliest days as a business owner in 1977 Jeff Thelen would wait each morning for the trucks to pull out of the garage at his father's plumbing business so he could roll his woodworking equipment out into the space they'd just vacated. He'd work most of the day, then, around 3 p.m., roll everything back out of the way, sweep up the sawdust and call it a day.

It was, he said, "a major pain in the butt." But it was a start. And for a kid just a couple of years out of high school it wasn't bad. The rent was free and he was able to drum up enough business with newspaper ads and flyers on telephone poles to keep himself busy. He was young and single and doing something he enjoyed.

"It didn't take much to keep me happy," he said. "An occasional case of beer, and that was all I needed."

The business was called Thelen Furniture and Woodworking then, and Thelen spent his days making custom coffee tables, end tables, nick-knack shelves and more. "If it was wood, I'd take it on," Thelen said. "I didn't have the good sense to say no."

He didn't have a lot of money, either. Thelen didn't have much of a paycheck for the first four years he was in business. But with low overhead for the business and cheap rent on a home owned by his uncle, he was able to support himself working part-time for a carpenter in Northfield.

Thirty-three years later Thelen still works with wood but just about everything else has changed. In 1980 he moved out of the back room at Farmington Plumbing and Heating and into a building in downtown Farmington. The business grew quickly there, and in 1990, with a little encouragement from the city of Farmington, he became the first tenant in what has become the city's industrial park. Now he's got an 18,000-square-foot building and computerized equipment that can do in a matter of minutes jobs that once would have taken hours of careful measuring and cutting.

The focus of the business has changed, too. Over the years Thelen Furniture and Woodworking became Thelen Cabinets and Jeff Thelen forged relationships with local homebuilders. They built the houses, he supplied the cabinets. He worked primarily with smaller, local builders because he didn't like the bureaucracy involved in dealing with larger, nationwide corporations.

At the peak of the housing boom in the Farmington area Thelen had about 15 full time employees. Now that the housing market has slowed he's down to six employees and business has shifted to include more work directly with homeowners who are remodeling or with businesses who need new cabinets. People come to him with ideas or with plans sketched out on a napkin and he helps make them reality.

Thelen doesn't do much of the work himself anymore. He spends most of his days in the office. He's the entire office staff for Thelen Cabinets.

Behind the scenes, much of the work is automated. Thelen got his first computer in 1991 and he bought the first CNC router in Dakota County. The computer-aided router can turn a few pieces of wood into a ready-to-assemble cabinet in minutes. To demonstrate, Thelen punches a few buttons and the machine goes to work etching a likeness of Mickey Mouse into a board.

"It went from using the t-square and triangle for drawing a plan to designing it on a computer screen," Thelen said.

It's a very different world than the one Thelen started out in, but he's still enjoying the work.

Early ambitions

Thelen knew early on he wanted to work with wood. He claimed he was the worst student in his shop class at Farmington High School, but he liked working with his hands and he enjoyed the satisfaction of completing a project.

There was never much thought of joining his father's plumbing business. He was one of 12 children in his family and one of seven boys. By the time he was old enough there were already four Thelen boys working in the business.

Thelen graduated from FHS in 1973 and attended technical school in Faribault to study woodworking and cabinetmaking. He picked up some grunt work with a Northfield carpenter before going out on his own.

Editor's note: This is the first installment of an occasional series exploring businesses in the Farmington industrial park.