

Portland company buys Bentwood

By Susan Goracke of the Daily Courier

Bentwood Furniture, a Grants Pass manufacturer for more than 30 years, has been purchased by Upstream 21 Corporation, a Portland holding company.

Brothers Gary and Randy White, who co-founded Bentwood in 1970 in Huntington Beach, Calif., then moved it to Grants Pass later that decade, will continue with the company.

"We are very pleased that Bentwood Furniture and all of our loyal employees have been added to the Upstream 21 family," Gary White said in a news release issued by Upstream 21.

"Randy and I are looking forward to doing what we do best - designing and manufacturing high-quality furniture. This new partnership allows us to do just that," he added.

The Whites' retail business, Rogue Valley Furniture at 310 N.W. Morgan Lane, is not part of the deal with Upstream 21. Nor is the Rogue Fly Shop, which occupies the same building and is owned by Josh White and Jeff Fox.

Speaking by phone from his Portland office, Upstream 21's Chief Executive Officer Bryan Gooch Redd said Gary White had contacted him after hearing that Upstream had acquired Jefferson State Forest Products.

Jefferson State Forest Products uses high-quality hardwoods to manufacture custom, handcrafted produce bins and store fixtures for companies such as Whole Foods Market. The company employs 55 workers in Hayfork, Calif., about 60 miles west of Redding and surrounded by the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. The former mining and mill town of 1,800 residents almost died when Sierra Pacific closed its operation in the mid-1990s and 150 people lost their jobs.

But a group of enterprising citizens began using recycled lumber and milling small trees to create attractive displays for businesses. That's when the budding company caught Upstream's attention.

Redd explained that he helped form Upstream 21 in 2004 along with members of Portfolio 21 Investments, which manages investments for a group of "very progressive" people who invest in socially and environmentally responsible companies.

"We think forest products are sustainable," said Redd, who added that a founding principle of the corporation is to consider the interests of employees, the community and the environment first, not to maximize shareholders' wealth.

"As far as I know, the model is unique," said Redd, a lawyer who "grew" a couple of successful businesses before he helped form Upstream. "My love had always been small and mid-sized businesses."

In 2007, Upstream acquired its second company, Community Smallwood Solutions of Wallowa, Ore. The small-diameter post and pole manufacturer specializes in roundwood products such as fencing, hop poles and tree stakes.

After meeting with the Whites, touring their factory and learning about their operation, Redd said he believes Upstream can help Bentwood grow from its current 22 employees because "people need well-made furniture."

In 2003, the Grants Pass manufacturing company had a core of 150 full-time employees. Two years later, the workforce had been cut in half as the company struggled to compete with lower-cost Asian imports.

Redd concedes Bentwood's growth won't be easy in today's economic climate.



TIMOTHY BULLARD/Daily Courier

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"We're obviously in the worst economic times, probably since the Great Depression," he pointed out.

However, he added that "Gary, Randy and their employees have built a company that produces sustainable, high-quality wood furniture that is an important part of the local and regional economy, and they possess the manufacturing knowledge and skills that are critical to the restoration and strengthening of our economy."

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Reach reporter Susan Goracke at 474-3725 or sgoracke@thedailycourier.com

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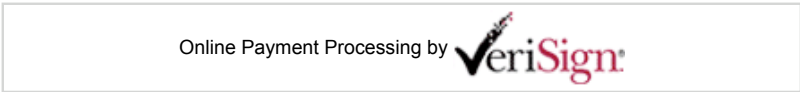
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409 S.E. 7th Street, Grants Pass, OR 97526-3003 | P.O. Box 1468, Grants Pass, OR 97528-0330
Phone: (541) 474-3700 | Toll-Free in Oregon: (800) 228-0457
Office Hours: Mon. - Fri. 8 a.m - 5 p.m.; Sat. 8 a.m. - 12 noon