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FINAL TRANSCRIPT

Narrator: Greg Aanes
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Interviewed By: Helen Divjak
Place: Greg Aanes Furniture, Bellingham, Washington

This is the transcript of a videotaped tour of Greg Aanes' shop.

HELEN DIVJAK: ... 2003, and I'm here with Greg Aanes of Greg Aanes Furniture in Bellingham, Washington. And where are we right now in your shop?

GREG AANES: Well, we're all the way in the back. [noise of sawing] Lumber comes in, and it just came in. As we carry the lumber in, we immediately grade it for different purposes, not just for different species, but actually different parts; different chairs, even. Different customers, even.

HD: And where does most of this wood come from?

GA: Well, it comes from all over. I'm pretty opportunistic about the wood that we have. This comes from Wisconsin; this comes from Michigan. Some of the maple we use is local maple we get from up in Sumas, Washington. Our cherry comes from Pennsylvania. Our mango comes from Hawaii. Jatoba comes from Brazil. That pretty well covers it... Oh! Tasmanian myrtle comes from Tasmania.

HD: Why did you get involved in buying all of this wood internationally?

GA: Because my main interest for getting into this business was I really liked the wood. I had a real deep affinity for the wood. And that still is the strong point in this operation.

I do a lot of the layout of more of our premium chairs, premium products, because I have an eye for the wood. I network with people who specialize in selling wood. There are people that sell specialty woods. I network with them and they get me going with different suppliers. I deal with small mills; they get me going with other small mills. You know, one thing leads to another, that sort of thing.

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HD: Where do we go next?

GA: OK, so how complete do you want to be? ... OK, the way I've laid the shop out is trying to get everything in the sequence of operations, and minimize the distance between operations. In other words, you don't take that lumber, those boards, and carry them clear across the shop.

The lumber merely goes five feet to the first saw where it gets cut, or "optimized," as the fancy term is. From there it goes onto carts, according to the parts. From the cross-cut saw ... see, here's a piece of lumber ... we cut it, we have a part; the part goes onto the cart. The next step for this part would be to go to the joiner there to join the edges. Then, from there, you can see it's only two feet to the saw. And then, we have a true piece of lumber.

Then, from there, the steps depend on the product. I would like it if everything followed the same sort of sequence, but it really doesn't. It starts to diverge right about here.

HD: I see you have some things hanging on the wall over here. Can you explain to me what those things are?

GA: OK, well, those are jigs. They belong to the shaper. I doubt that you can see it down there, it's kind of buried. We'll get down there.

All those jigs cut shapes. In other words, say, primarily what we make here are chairs here. That's my specialty; that's my strong point. Everybody seems to make tables, and they make darn good tables. And so I make chairs. Would you like me to demonstrate how they work?

VIDEOGRAPHER: Sure.

GA: OK. [noise of sawing] Watch your foot. Ummm ... let's see ... front, bottom, side apron ... this might take a second to find the right jig. [tape recorder turned off]

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OK, we're going down. So this is not the piece of wood that we would shape, but just to give you an idea of the principle ... you put your piece of wood in, lock your clamps down. And this edge follows the shaper and cuts it clean.

Shall we move on down to the shaper here?

VIDEOGRAPHER: OK.

GA: This is going to take some maneuvering, right around there. [noise of sawing] Oh! I've gotta grab a jig.... OK, so this is the shaper. And this surface, the surface of the shape, would run against the bearing, and the cutter will cut it off through.

HD: So are each of these jigs made specifically just for your furniture?

GA: Yes. Yes, we make our own jigs for each piece. And they also, they wear out. They have a very finite lifespan. Sometimes they only last six months. So it's important to learn how to make them fast and accurate and versatile. That's the whole trick.

But really, we don't use this machine much. This is a manual shaper; we have an automatic shaper that does most of our shaping.

Now, I don't know if you want to just go in a straight line and see things in the shop, or do you want to just jump to the other shaper?

HD: Why don't we just continue in a straight line? It's a little easier.

GA: OK. Let's just look at what's available here. Some of those boards over there, after they were trued up, they've been glued together, they've been sanded – this is our sander, here, automatic sander. And there are seats for stools.

OK, this we make on the CNC router. In other words, this is in progress, so you put the blank onto the piece of plywood ... and start it, and it will take 10 ½ minutes to create this. And in one operation, it'll shape the outside, it drills the holes, and then it scoops it.

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Now, this may seem a bit out of sync with what we do. People see my work and say, "Oh, it's hand-made." Well, I can't dispute that. So far, everything we've done is using our hands, including this.

Actually, I built this machine. I built it eleven years ago. It's quite ancient by now. It would be considered obsolete. I can turn it on, you can see it run. But it brings up the question, what is hand-made. What difference does it make, you know? It's the result that matters. And also, because it's done by computer-controlled routers and not hand-made, even though I built it and built the code for it.

HD: So you've programmed this machine to cut, or to bore these holes in these stool seats?

GA: Oh, yeah. So each movement that machine makes is a line of code. They're very common; they're used in the metalworking industry. But I have to write each line of code by hand.

HD: And besides these stool seats, what else do you use this machine for?

GA: This machine, actually, we use it for making jigs. [chuckles] Because once you have your shape – in other words, all of the furniture here, after I've designed it, actually drawn it up – and it's a computer, it's a CAD drawing – I can cut shapes off the CAD drawing. So all of these shapes are archived on a CD.

Unlike the old way, which is to cut a template and then use that to draw your lines and make your jigs off of. Well, we always had drift, and we had errors, compounding a little bit each time. And after we'd made five jigs off the manual template, the shape would be off an eighth of an inch. But this way, the shapes are archived. We just set 'em in stone.

So yeah, we cut seats, we do our scoop seats on it. We let it do boring, because it's incredibly accurate for boring holes. Plus, there's nothing more boring than to stand there and drill a million holes on a drill press.

Other than that, that's about it. We cut in small joints, also we use older, more conventional machines for cutting most of our work.

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HD: I also notice in this room, you've got quite a bit of sawdust around. Do you recycle that?

GA: *Oh, do we ever.* [chuckles] You read the article, huh? We have some bins on the other side of the shop there, and I don't even keep them locked anymore. And yeah, it all could be gone tomorrow morning.

We see people coming in, in the middle of the night, and loading up their trucks. They haul it off, so we don't have any disposal problem, unlike most shops where you have to pay to dispose of the sawdust. Now, if we put out a whole lot more, we would have a problem.

We put our wood scraps in the plastic barrels, and we just put 'em out on the sidewalk with a sign that says "Free Wood Scraps," and they're gone. Just like magic....

Well, they're doing what it looks like they're doing. They're sawing wood. This is Mark and this is Kevin, and these are the guys that really get the stuff done here. We do rely on as much small-scale machinery as we can, as is practical – anything to save fingers, to make it safer, and save tedium. These guys, their skills are a whole lot more important than just putting things through the saw all day long.

HD: I notice that they're cutting each size differently. Is that for the different parts of the furniture?

GA: Actually, we're not cutting each size differently. They're all cutting the same size. It just looks that way.

This cart is a different size.... Oh, is that what you were referring to? Oh, OK. [chuckles] Yes, it's all for the different parts, yeah. [tape recorder turned off]

This is a band saw. I don't know for sure, but these are the parts that came off the first saw we looked at.

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This is one of the things that I do. I've laid out the pieces, so I had very clear ideas about the grain orientation, the color, how I want to put the pieces so they match with each other, so that it looks good in the final product.

Really, for what I'm doing, my value is that I have the vision in this business, the vision of what the end product should look like. That's the "artistic touch," versus the manufactured part, where everything's alike and everything's really un-exciting.

These'll get cut open on the band saw, just a quarter inch from the line, not too close. Then, if we can look back there, these parts will go onto that shaper, and if we want to –

HD: Can I briefly ask you a question about – I see that you've made drawings, essentially, on the wood here. Is that hand-drawn or are you using a stencil?

GA: A stencil sort of effect. Patterns. I just drop it down and I draw around it. Because I shift it up and down. For instance, to get the shape of the grain right up in here so that it matches that part, that's it as much as anything.

And also, to miss the knots. A lot of what's involved at this stage – it requires a lot of experience – is visualizing the board and visualizing the problems that are inside it. In other words, the knots, the cracks, mineral pockets. If you see a hint of one, looking at the end, trying to determine, trying to guess which way it goes into the wood so you know where to place your piece.

Because you get the most interesting parts as close to flaws as possible. In other words, the farther you move away from a flaw, the more homogenous it'll be, and I'm trying to maximize the interest.

People are buying my chairs, yes, for the design; yes, for the craftsmanship; yes, for the comfort. But it comes down to the wood. They're buying the wood that's in there, and they want to see it.

HD: And this next step that you want to take us to look at now?

GA: Yes, it's back ... we need to walk around these piles, here. OK.

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This machine currently is all torn apart. This is a crisis right now. This is the heart of our manufacturing operation. It has two heads. The heads swing in and out against the jig. Again, which we make with the CNC router, the computer-controlled machine. And it shapes the parts. It shapes them to a very high level of quality, and it shapes them extremely fast.

And it's broken right now, and this has been a huge problem here. You can't see, [but] the whole back is torn apart. We've got the hydraulic system off and everything. So I can't even move the table and operate it right now.

HD: So what happened to the machine that made it break?

GA: It's very simple. An electrical coil, which activates a hydraulic valve – this whole thing operates on hydraulics and its movements, and then the coil starting acting up, and we lived with it. I was out of town at the time, and I came back and I said, "Well, you kick it here and it'll run." And it did for a little while, and then it finally gave up the ghost.

And so it's an Italian-made machine. This has been a problem for us all along. Many of our machines are foreign-made. Many of them are old. They come out of factories that have basically figured they've depreciated and they buy the more current thing. So they say this is old, and it's Italian, to boot. The importer says they no longer have the parts or diagrams for it anymore.

This was built in 1985. [chuckles] Things move fast in industry. And so it's taken me a week of networking with every hydraulic supplier in the country to find who brings in the parts for this Italian control. And I just found it two hours ago.

HD: And what does that mean for making your furniture right now? Are you set back quite a bit?

GA: All of these parts are basically queued up, waiting to go through this machine. Yeah, it's pushing our whole schedule behind. We have deadlines and we say if we don't make such-and-such a deadline, we're going to start hand-shaping these on the old shaper. But that is such an onerous task, we keep ignoring the deadlines and setting new ones.

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And the deadline right now is ten o'clock tomorrow morning for the part. And we'll probably run it twelve hours to get this backlog cleared out.

But this size business, we run it 3 percent of the time it's sitting here, which isn't very much. It's a \$100,000 machine, if you were to buy it new. I bought it for \$13,000. It was in terrible shape. But I put the energy into it, I fixed it up. You can see where things have been replaced. Because that's all we can afford doing.

And the unhappy side of that is that it breaks down constantly. And when it breaks down, we can't just get on the phone and order parts. Usually we have to take the part to the local machine shop, or find a supplier who can match something that's close. I have the electricians here a lot for this machine.

HD: How much time does it take to cut one of these by hand versus cutting one on a machine like that?

GA: Well, the cycle time ... it cuts two at a time. It cuts two of these at a time. I wish I could show you, but essentially, it goes into the machine, and it has two heads to shape the sides. So it cuts two pieces at a time, and it cycles in three-tenths of a minute, fifteen, twenty seconds, somewhere in there.

To cut one of these by hand, we would have two people on it, one person loading and the other person hand-feeding. And it would take two people probably ... thirty or forty seconds to cut one.

So you're looking at probably ten seconds to cut one on this machine and forty seconds to cut one on the other machine. And plus, we would have ... the cutters would catch on the manual machine, and actually literally blow the piece up, throw the piece out of the jig. You'd have potential accidents, people getting hurt. That's very unlikely. Mostly, we would lose parts.

The poor operator, it shoots his day. I have to send him home early because he just feels like he's been in a car wreck. So that's why this is far, far more preferable. And what I do for a number of retail shows – I do about five of

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them a year – and I have people coming up and they ask how we make it. And I tell them how, and they say, “But I want something that’s hand-made.”

And the only thing I can say is it’s going cost you five times as much, and I can’t do it for my whole life, so I’m going to have to charge more per hour, because I’m going to have to have a real retirement. So this is a shortcut. This is a shortcut, and unless you hire a lot of immigrant labor, and pay them nothing, and just basically toss ‘em out when they’re worn out ... that’s not what I want to be doing here.

HD: So despite this machine’s little blips, you’re going to keep it for a little bit longer and just keep repairing it?

GA: Absolutely. *Absolutely*. It’s paid for. It’s paid for. We’ll keep fixing it. Every time I repair it, it’s easier to repair next time, because the parts I put in are interchangeable. Or when this little electrical part went out, I bought an extra one that’s coming tomorrow. So when it does it again, I’ll know right what to do and I’ll have the part on the shelf.

Actually, to me, this machine becomes more valuable with time. Because we know more about it, and as we maintain it, we maintain it to a higher standard. And I know that’s backwards from how large industry does it. They think the machine has a declining value, and it’s worth nothing at a certain point.

Well, that’s true when it gets to the point where it doesn’t operate anymore because it needs a lot of maintenance. But for us, no, we just have to give it some intense maintenance and bring it back up to snuff, and ... no, it doesn’t lose value.

HD: Do you anticipate that once you do get this fixed, or once you have to decide to cut these manually, that you’re going to have to put in a lot of overtime to meet the deadlines, or will you just push the deadlines back?

GA: They don’t work overtime. [laughter] I offer it, but ... if I can, I’ll do a little bit of schedule juggling. In other words, they start work at six-thirty. I’ll see if I can get some of them to come in later and later, so that they can work later into the evening.

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But that's part of our company culture – they don't work overtime. I do, so I'll be running into the evening. And I might even take a little extra time off on the weekend, but probably not. [tape recorder turned off]

What we have here, this is our most important joint. It's a very traditional furniture joint. This is what gives you the quality that lasts. It's a mortise and tenon joint. This is your mortise. It's a slot 1" deep. This is the machine we use to cut it. [machinery noise]

The cutting head, it's simply going back and forth and working it. One second. [machinery noise] OK...that's the easy part, is cutting the tenon. Now, I'll show you the machine that cuts the tenon, the opposite side over here. Unfortunately, I can't run it because they have lumber on it....

If I can recall how to run it. Oh, yeah. [machinery noise] OK, so this machine is going around it and cutting the tenon. OK, the value of this is not only do we have the highest quality joint you can get, but you can cut it extremely fast.

Again, when people picture your hand-made furniture, they picture a bunch of guys sitting at a bench, sawing these and chiseling them out. Well, for a whole chair, with sixteen of these, you could spend six to eight hours doing it. Or you can do a hundred chairs in one hour with this machine. And we're getting old. [laughter]

OK, we have a very simple joint here but it's problematic to actually cut, to drill your hole in one plane and hit it precisely, the hole in the top. So where necessary, we just build our own piece of machinery and set it up so it does only this and nothing else, and we don't adjust it. And so if we want one of these, we just run it off and drill our holes and that's it.

HD: And what kind of piece is this here that you're holding?

GA: This is a rear leg, the back of a chair, and this holds the rocker up. And if I didn't have this cord on me, I could [show] the hardware, the bolt goes through with a pin.

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And so actually, we can actually unbolt our rockers. Just take a hex wrench and take the darn things off. We don't do that. We don't sell them as ready-to-assemble furniture, but maybe we should.

HD: And the machines you were just talking about are all these machines in the back, over here?

GA: It's all the way in the corner, with the vertical drill and horizontal drill together.

HD: And you said that you designed it yourself?

GA: Yeah, we build things like that all the time. Attach router motors and drills, anything to fixture it up. The goal is to go into the part, go over to this machine, put the part in, and just do the operation, and not have to spend twenty minutes to adjust it and get it ready. And it works really well when you can do that. [tape recorder turned off]

OK, now we're in the assembly room. We were in the machining room, where we do as many of our machining processes. In this room, we do as much of the assembly and final sanding that happens prior to assembly in here.

Sean, as you can see, Sean usually works part-time. He's an engineering student up at Western [Washington University] during the year. Sean is sanding spindles here. The flap sander simply knocks the sharp edges down. Another thing that can be done by hand, but...

We have various sanders. I've found that anything you can do to save time, to optimize your sanding operations, is the only way you can make a profit in this business. Sanding and finishing is the most time-consuming aspect of making furniture. That's universally known.

So ... OK, now, in the corner here ... what we have here, this is not real common. It's a sanding booth. And the air exits out at the top – again, we built this here – and it is pulled in through these filters. There's a large motor at the top, a blower motor, and it simply pulls the air through the filters. In an ideal world, it would drop most of the dust before it hits the filters, but the

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filters catch most of the dust and it returns the cleaned air at the top, and it simply does a big loop.

It's the equivalent of being in about a twenty-mile-an-hour wind, so it gets a bit chilly if the temperature drops below fifty. But it ensures we have a perfectly clean environment. There are some operations that we do in here that are extremely dust-intensive. And so, it helps people's health.

HD: Just so I understand how this works, you would have somebody in here with any number of pieces sanding by hand; and then, what they're sanding off is getting sucked through these filters here?

GA: Right, right. The person sanding would be ideally right at this point, because this is where the airflow comes in. And the airflow comes in from the top, and does a straight line all the way down to the bottom. So you want your work right in the airflow.

And when you're using it, you know, you can tell. You can see. You can see the dust going right off. You can position yourself and actually, you don't have to wear any breathing masks, depending on what you're doing. That's a big plus. [tape recorder turned off]

Oh, that's for doing cleaning. You drop the blinds and then you clean the filters off, and all the dust falls down in below. If the blinds are open and you clean the filters, the dust can fall in below and doesn't come roiling out into the room. [tape recorder turned off]

OK, you have a chair leg here. It's round. But unlike typical chair legs you get down at the oak unfinished store, it's not a cylinder, a concentric circle. You can see, it has a curve to it, and it has a curve in this direction also. So it's a compound curve.

When I started, we made them the way we could, which was cutting it out on a band saw, and using a router, and hand-shaping them. But as soon as I could, as soon as I could find an old machine like this – again, it's a \$90,000 machine new but I got it for \$4,000 out of Canada – it still barely runs but it does what we need it to. We don't need it to run that much.

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OK, we put three blanks of wood, so it cuts three at a time. The pattern is up here. I can't turn it on because we've got too much stuff blocking it in. But these are the cutters. And the cutters advance while they're turning, and the head swings in and out, following the pattern, right? It's a bit of a difficult concept to get, until you see it run. But what you get is it cuts three of these legs at a time, and takes about nine minutes per leg.

HD: Have you programmed this machine yourself to cut that particular shape?

GA: Oh, this was built back about the time they had the first computer going in Chicago. [chuckles] It's totally manual. So it operates off a pattern. [tape recorder turned off]

Hopefully you can see on this that we started in the far back corner of the shop, and as we're following the parts, they're moving forward. That is the best for this particular space. By the time the chair gets up here, it's been machined, it's been sanded, it's been assembled, and it's been final sanded by hand. From here, it will go through the fire door, and will go and be finished.

As each step progresses, as the wood turns into a product and progresses down the line, everything slows down and becomes more skill-intensive. That's why we use machines farther down the line. And up here, you don't see much except for hand sanders and drills and chisels and that sort of a thing.

Sanding, as I said, is one of the most onerous steps in building furniture. It's an unnecessary step. It adds absolutely no real value to the chair. It's only an aesthetic issue; it's a style issue. Yet it has to be done flawlessly. And that's what adds all the value to the chair.

If we cut out all of our high quality sanding and finishing, we could drop the price of the chair to less than half. And people are happy to pay for the higher quality. But it is the most difficult one to achieve on a consistent basis.

That is a case where it's better to pay your employees more money, let them develop the skills that take time, and keep them around. Give them health

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insurance so that they don't have to keep thinking about how they're going to take care of this or that. Because it is the most difficult step to reproduce.

And I owe our compliments here to my employees. Because I'm in there checking it and making sure everything's right and doing the checks here and there, but they all have to do it up to the same high level.

Our goal is to machine the parts so accurately, and to pre-sand them so well, so when it gets to the point of being hand sanded, there's really very little to do. It's more scanning and looking for defects, looking for things that have been overlooked.

Our eyes get very tired of looking at the chairs, and looking closely at the wood. But, you know, we get through. Everyone has to trade off, because their eyes physically get tired, you eventually get kind of blurry at it.

Everyone down the line is in charge of quality control. We do not have one Q.C. person, which is necessary in a large organization because somebody has to take responsibility. We're small enough here to where everybody takes responsibility.

And it works. *It works.* It may be more difficult if we had a larger organization. I think you could hide a little better.

HD: About how long does it take to sand a chair like this by hand?

GA: The final sanding, once it's assembled, right before it goes in to be finished, we shoot for ten or fifteen minutes per chair. And when you have thirty-five chairs, that's the better part of the day for a group of three people.

HD: What is this particular style called?

GA: This is a Pacific chair.... One problem with sanding, also, is carpal tunnel syndrome. I have to watch my people very closely, you know, watch how they're bending their wrist. Because if you have your wrists bent while you're performing the work, and you do it on a regular basis, you will start to develop tendon problems. And so, it's physical work. But we have to do it such that we can keep doing it indefinitely. [tape recorder turned off]

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Well, and now it's gotten real quiet. We're in the finishing room here. We bring the finished chairs in here. We've looked at them three times, by now. They've been finish-sanded. And they do go through what we call a Q.C. step, but that is not any one person's responsibility. [We trade off the final inspection]

The operating principle there is you do not quality control your own chairs. [chuckles] It's like when you write a story, you know, you don't read your own story to see if it's good.

Then we move them in here, we dust them off and we move them in here. They get two coats of finish. Finishes are not what they used to be, they are far better. This is lacquer, but is a pre-catalyzed lacquer, which means it is water resistant.

You can pour water into the scoop on this seat. The water will evaporate and it won't mark the wood or anything. There's no reason for that happening anymore. With today's chemistry, finishing has finally gone from being a black art to being a science. And we're all better off for it.

Also, the volatiles – the hazardous fumes – are way down now, compared to the way they used to be. So some things are getting better in the world.

We give them two full coats, two coats full-strength of lacquer, which provides the build. And then we scuff-sand in-between, get the whiskers off, and then we spray with a very diluted coat of lacquer that dries slowly. It's been retarded so it doesn't dry quickly.

So that the overspray that's drifting around – as you spray here, you get a cloud of overspray that tends to drift; whereas if you spray here, you'll get overspray that goes through and it lands onto [another section of] the chair. Typically, finishes dry so fast now that overspray dries within seconds and you have a dry spray stuck to your chair.

The final coat is very thin and it's very retarded, so it dries very slow, so it stays wet for about four or five minutes. And you can go through and you can spray the whole chair, and it remains wet and everything melds together.

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And we mostly achieve our goal of: at that point, it's done. We do go over them with some steel wool or extremely fine sandpaper to get dust specks out. But there are very few. This is a good example, this chair. Most people would say it's done. They wouldn't figure out why we would look at it more, from this standpoint.

From here, we get seats. We do our own upholstery. I have investigated jobbing out upholstery. I've tried a few times with results that weren't the best, and what it comes down to, is this business is to make furniture. And we make our profit making furniture. And so we don't make anything by having someone else do it.

Once you get up into the higher end stuff and in smaller shops, it's difficult to charge for your name, it's difficult to charge for your sales efforts, it's difficult to charge for anything, except for the hard goods. And so we make them ourselves. And that's what it's all about. We do our own upholstery. We stock our own fabrics. There's very little that we don't do here.

This piece, this bent piece, I do buy from Vermont in large quantities, simply because they can give us what we want and what we need at a price that we can't do ourselves.

One of the drawbacks of making furniture in this part of the country is that we really – even though the Northwest has a lot of trees, we really don't have a lot of lumber that's not softwood. And all the hardwoods tend to come from the East Coast. Our cherry comes from Pennsylvania, which is about 85 percent of what we use.

And so we're at the end of the line, on the cherry. In other words, everyone else has selected it, and we're paying the most amount of money, too. So in many instances, it is better, if you can, to buy your components from the East Coast, where a component factory is situated right next to a mill. And they bring pallets in and they can pull their wood and you're not paying to ship out bad wood.

In other words, I think we only actually have about [30] percent of the original wood in a chair. The other [70] percent goes out in shavings and wood

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scraps. So by buying your components, you're not having to ship that stuff out to become shavings and wood scraps. So, it does make sense. And do what you do best. But you lose your flexibility, so it's a tradeoff.

HD: I have a question about a comment you made earlier, when you said that no one quality assures their own chair.

GA: Right.

HD: Now, in a shop like this, where I expect most of your carpenters are working on many different projects at the same time, how do you decide who checks what chair and what chair belongs to who?

GA: You just don't do your own. People put kind of marks on their chairs as kind of a shorthand there. Years ago, we used to do initials. But there is a bit of shorthand on the chairs. People know which chairs are theirs. You can just tell, with only three people, everyone tends to stack their chairs in only one area even, and it comes down to that.

The way my crew works here is they like working together. There are people that want to go in a corner and work on their own. Well, Mark, Robin, Kevin and Sean, they like working together. So they do all the sanding together, they do all the machining together typically. [chuckles] And that's kind of how things have evolved for us.

HD: And then an individual will assemble a chair and sand it and bring it here, is that right?

GA: Well, the chairs are assembled in a team. Two people assemble them, because it goes much easier to have four hands. And we work in batches of thirty, and no one chair is built by one person from start to finish. It's a group effort on those thirty chairs. Does that make sense?

HD: Uh-huh.

GA: So, unlike the old craftsmanship way of operating, where the craftsman took the product and followed it through to the end, [each craftsperson is the only person to touch their chair] and they had theirs and the craftsmen had

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theirs – you have thirty items made by five people – essentially you had six different ways of making chairs, because everyone has their own way. Well, this is more of an averaging sort of a method. Everyone works together, and so all the skills get averaged in together.

And different people have different strong points. Some people are better at sanding than others. Some people are better at assembling than others. We've got a person here who, for some reason, can put the precise amount of glue in a joint, that fills up the joint and there's no squeeze-out, you know. I'm still in awe of him for being able to do that, because I make a mess of that. But, see, we all have our strong points.

I can see color. I can see the wood grain. Other people can sand extremely well. Other people are very good setting up certain machines. Other people are very organized. And largely, it's allowing those talents, the natural talents, to surface, to bubble to the surface. And it's only natural to let that happen. [chuckles] You know, let the person who's good at something do it. And I think it works extremely well.

HD: And from here, when they're finished, and they're upholstered if they need upholstery, where do they go next?

GA: OK. Actually, the seats get upholstered in a stack. You can see two seats upholstered over there. And so all the seats get upholstered at once, because that's a discrete operation.

From there, these finished chairs will go back out into the assembly room. That's one of the problems – we need more room here. We're doing double duty in some of our space, and the path, which starts at the back of the shop and moves to the front of the shop, starts to zigzag the closer you get to the front. In other words, as the chairs progress, they're going back and forth to different stations instead of following a linear path out.

But they go back out to the assembly room. They get seats attached. They get the final quality check. And they get bundled up in sets of two, because that's how we ship them. And they go onto a delivery truck, or they go into a box, a cardboard box. You just missed a shipment that went out at noon. We

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had six boxes here. And it goes to the customer. So a real simple value stream. [tape recorder turned off]

End of Analog Audio Tape 1 of 1 for September 9, 2003, Side A

HD: I'm now here with Greg Aanes in his showroom. We're still in Bellingham in your facility. Can you tell me about the chair that you're sitting in right now?

GA: Well, it's a walnut chair. Actually, this particular chair has an interesting story. We shipped a walnut chair to a customer, I think in Michigan, and that chair got lost. So we sent them out a second chair to replace that and then the first one, as usual, popped up. And this is the first one that got lost, so it has a nice story to it.

It is the Brendan rocker. There's a famous story behind it— famous within my company — behind the Brendan rocker. I used to build all kinds of furniture, anything I could think of. And not really having any purpose or any sequence, more of just a personal development sort of thing. I guess I was in my twenties during those years. But I didn't build chairs.

I built a couple chairs, enough to know that I didn't like them. And then, when we had our first child, who is now 17 ½, my wife said she needed a rocking chair and I said, "I'll build one." And she said, "Yeah ... and how long do I have to wait?" [chuckles]

And I've had the history straightened out on me. I used to think she went to Salvation Army and bought a chair, but it turns out she borrowed it from a friend. I just found that out recently, when we went over the history in the family.

And it was an old painted chair, you know. It had about eighteen layers of green paint on it. But, you know, it was *good*. It had good — not great — it had good balance. It had good angles. And so, in a very big hurry — because I could see if I didn't get it done, I wouldn't get it done at all — little did I know the truth of that! — I built a rocking chair. And I used that first chair as a template for some of the angles and some of the balance and some of the rocking motion. You know, you have to start somewhere.

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And it was good. It was good. A lot of people asked about it. No one offered to buy a chair like that, but enough people asked [when I would make] another one. And then, before I knew it, I did one of the street fairs. I don't do outdoor art fairs anymore. Haven't done that for 16 ½ years now. But I got feedback.

I got to see people sitting in them. I learned a few things about chairs. I learned, number one, most chairs are not comfortable – wood chairs. Number two, when a person sits in a chair, you can tell by looking at their face and their body language what feels good and what doesn't, even if they can't verbalize it themselves.

I found out that, for the kind of guy I am, they really aren't hard to build. They're just a bunch of pieces put together. I found out you don't have to use a tape measure, building a chair. And that's suits me *very well*.

It's a lot like boat building, in that you take your pieces, you put them where you want, and you scribe them. And I also found out that not many people build chairs at all, and very few of them were truly comfortable.

So I had a lot of opportunity there. And I was desperate for some opportunity at the time, having a new family and having not made any money in woodworking in years and years and years. [chuckles] But, feeling an enormous pressure to do that, I took them and started running with it. And ... and next question? [laughter]

HD: So you were saying this is called the Brendan rocker, so it's named after your son?

GA: It's named after Brendan, yes.

HD: And you spoke about how the original rocker that your wife had [got] didn't have quite right balance. Can you tell me about how this chair here has the right balance?

GA: It has a unique shape on the rockers, and determining the balance [was by trial and error]. That was before I used computers for anything; and no

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one else really did, either. And it was all by trial and error – putting your pieces together, taping them together, and looking at them, and sitting in them – and then modifying.

[Then] you could short-circuit some of that, by designing your chair on the computer, assigning it mass, and finding the specific gravity. But it still is going to be trial and error. You're going to take the drawing and you're going to translate it into reality, and you're still going to be modifying it – an eighth-inch off here, an eighth-inch off there.

The rule of thumb is to make changes in small increments, you know, just a few percent on your change. Because a small change won't bring about a large effect, it'll bring up a small effect. And if it's not the way you want to go, no one's going to notice. You can just back up in your next model. And so it's doing many iterations.

Which brings up the other reason chairs suited me really well. I learn best through a lot of repetition. [chuckles] And in the realm of chairs, you've got to make a *lot* of 'em. And we've made probably ... I don't know ... we've probably made about 6,000 chairs now, since that first one. So we've had a lot of repetition, a lot of chance to get it down.

So, yeah, it's all a modification off that first one. And if I had to give anyone any advice, I would say you've gotta start on that first one. Don't hesitate, don't ponder too much about that first one. Get it built. Don't ponder too much about the second one, even. Just keep making them.

Chairs are easy to make, and as long as you're not trying to make a masterpiece, you can be real quick and dirty with them. And you can build them pretty fast, and you can try them out and you can run through them pretty quickly.

HD: What year did you make that first chair?

GA: Well, without using a calculator, about seventeen years ago ...[chuckles]
... 1986.

HD: And how long had you been doing woodworking before then?

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GA: [19]81. [19]81 was when I got my first business license, where I thought I was making enough that it was time to start collecting sales tax on it. You know, before then, it was kind of here and there and nothing was for real. But [19]81 was when I felt like it was time to become official about it.

HD: Where did you first acquire your skills, or your interest, in woodworking?

GA: As I said before, I really like wood. I have quite the affinity for wood. Just like some people can see colors, and see them in their mind, and frequently, they become interior decorators, I can see wood. And I can see it in my mind, and I can look at the grain and I can kind of envision what's going on inside it. So I can imagine what the grain is going to look like once it's shaped.

And so, I have a real affinity for wood. Also, having come out of the [19]70s – being a child of the [19]60s and [19]70s – it was a bit organic. [laughs] And so it seemed like a natural thing.

Also, my early jobs were in construction, building houses, and you're using wood. And it seemed like an interesting thing to do, but it seemed very coarse. I really don't have much experience doing anything else in life. In 1981, I was twenty-six years old. [chuckles]

HD: Where did you spend most of your childhood?

GA: In eastern Iowa. I was born in Tennessee. I grew up in Arkansas, but my formative years were definitely in Iowa.

My grandparents had nice wood furniture, which, of course, they acquired after their daughter had grown and gone, as usually happens. That's my main customers now – empty nesters.

So I grew up looking at very nice wood that was finished very nicely. And even as a child, I had that affinity for looking at the grains. And so I realized that it was a natural ability.

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I believe very strongly in natural abilities. I believe very strongly that we can engineer ourselves, if we have an interest. We can increase our awareness and tune ourselves in to it, and learn a tremendous amount about it.

But we still have our natural abilities. Which you see in kids, you know. Some kids are great at math. Other kids are great at acting. Those are your natural abilities; and you work through those natural abilities – well, then, you’re going to do well, if you put some effort into it also.

And so, you know, wood and working with 3D objects was one of my natural abilities. And I’ve been very happy doing it.

As a matter of fact, now, a lot of days, I spend all my time in the office, on the phone, feeding the fax machine, entering orders, on and on and on. I get home and my wife – she says, “What did you do today?” And I have to say, “I’m not sure.” It doesn’t feel like anything.

When I get back in the shop and start building something, working on a design, just start sawing some parts, I feel like I’m really accomplishing something there. So it’s a good indication of, you know, probably what you should be using as a strength.

HD: And as a young man, as a teenager, did you start woodworking then, perhaps in high school, or did you have a mentor that you worked with?

GA: No. [chuckles] No, I did not. No, I’m not sure what track I was on in high school. I can’t *remember* even. But it was not on a woodworking track. Just trying to survive teen-hood then. With no particular focus. [laughter]

HD: What did you do when you finished high school?

GA: I went to college for a couple years.

HD: Whereabouts?

GA: Colorado. My mother moved to Colorado, remarried and moved to Colorado, and so I kind of followed them out there. It was an opportunity and I think it was there that – in a place where virtually everyone was imported

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and had come from somewhere else, and were starting new lives, that they were open to new ideas. People felt like they could be who they wanted to be all of a sudden – at that time in life, it made a huge influence on me, realizing that I could make the choices that I wanted to make. And I wanted to have my own little part of the world where I could build what I wanted to build, you know. That was really the only thing that seemed real to me.

HD: And you knew at that point that you wanted to build furniture?

GA: No, at that point, I really wanted to spend more time in mountains – hiking, climbing, that sort of thing. But I realized – and I was going to school, aiming towards a career [in the Forest Service] – and I realized that it was going to be a real difficult job to get at that time.

And then, to do it would mean a lot of travel. Because if you work for the Forest Service or Fish and Game, you end up getting transferred, and traveling and ... no, this wasn't the kind of life I wanted, you know. I knew I wanted a home base.

HD: And how did you decide that the Pacific Northwest would be your home base?

GA: *Oh, wow.* Ummm ... well, I was getting a bit dissatisfied with Colorado. It was starting to feel ... it was not what I really wanted. And I'd met my wife in Alaska – I'd spent some time up in Alaska – and we wanted to spend some time together. We were looking at the future.

And she lived in California and I felt that California wasn't where I wanted to go. But I wish I had bought real estate! [chuckles] And [Bellingham] seemed like a great compromise. It seemed to have everything. And it's been a good place, you know. It has.

HD: How did you decide on Bellingham?

GA: Oh, just looked at a map. [chuckles] Most of the people here in Bellingham went to school here. I didn't. No, we just came here, and I just came here to get a job, found a place to live and moved into the community. It was much smaller then. And now, it's home for us.

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HD: I wanted you to elaborate more on something you said earlier when you mentioned that growing up in the [19]60s and [19]70s, that time, was somewhat “organic”. Can you explain what you mean by that and how that affected your choice to become a woodworker?

GA: I’m trying to think of how to put that into words. Hmm. More organic, yes, or more *real*. However you want to put that. Searching for meaning. Searching for some sort of meaning. Yeah. That’s really what it’s all about, yeah.

HD: And by that, do you mean that you found meaning in doing work that was meaningful to you?

GA: Yeah. Isn’t that what most people are looking for? Isn’t that what you’re looking for?

You know, we all look for meaning in the work we do, and so many people seem to be de-emphasizing work now. But work is very important to me. And, you know, it’s the culture I came from, the Midwestern culture. And, I think, particularly being a man in this culture that we’re defined by the work we do. And for some, it’s how many sales you can make. For others, it’s what you can build.

HD: So you came to Bellingham in the [19]80s?

GA: 1980 exactly.

HD: And what did you do next, once you got here?

GA: I got a job working in construction. It was the tail end of the construction boom. It had really tapered off to nothing. And essentially, just worked, and ended up going to work for cabinet shops.

I think that’s one of the factors that drove me to do what I do. You know, the weather here is pretty bad. Taken as a whole, we don’t have that much good weather. Even in the summer, it’s cool. And so I was driven inside, looking to

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work inside. And so, I ended up working building cabinets. So that was a large factor.

HD: What did you learn while making cabinets?

GA: Well, I learned how to sand. I learned about the basic tooling. Because believe me, none of them were advanced; they were all pretty simple.

But a lot of what I learned were negative things that were important later. I learned what a hassle it is, moving things around. And to this day, I'm almost manic about it, that everything should be as close as possible. In other words, you don't carry big boards from one end of the shop to another. And so on.

And, like I said, I learned largely about sanding. Sanding's quite the skill. And I learned about nail guns. [chuckles] And I saw businesses run. I saw a shop business run. I was able to observe that. I was able to observe the stresses. And financial stresses.

And ... I also observed how employers treated their employees in shop situations. And I have to say, for every bad situation that I wanted to avoid, there was a good situation also somewhere else. But ultimately, doing something like this, the key is the people that work for you, and what they get down, and how they fit into the organization. And so I think I learned a tremendous amount there.

HD: Is there anything specific that you remember learning there, in terms of how you interact with your employees?

GA: Yeah. This isn't that specific, but respect is very important. Even when you don't feel like giving it, you need to somehow get it across. *Respect*. Because I saw a real lack of that with some employers, and I saw a very poor attitude, as a result. So I've spent most of my business life trying to learn how to do it right, with an organization.

You know, I have this notion that some people just know how. Well, I didn't just know how. And learning how to do it right, and trying to put that into practice, you know, that's the whole idea of engineering what you're doing.

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Engineering what you're doing so you can engineer the organization. And engineer the product. And make it all come together.

HD: How many people do you employ right now?

GA: Three full-time ... well, four, now that our part-timer's been full-time for the summer. But as soon as Western starts, he'll be back part-time.

HD: And how do you think working in a small shop, like this, differs from perhaps where you were working before?

GA: Well, in a larger shop, it's easier to get lost, to find a corner and get lost. You mean much less. Here, you're one-third of the organization. In a shop with ten people, you're only one-tenth. And that's not much. And you're not nearly as important. So, whatever one does here is extremely important.

And when one person here goes on vacation [chuckles] there's a *big* gap left. When you have ten people and one person goes on vacation, everyone just puts in another 10 percent and they're covered.

HD: What kind of skills do you look for in your employees, when you first hire them?

GA: Well, I'm looking at that a bit right now, since we're extremely, extremely swamped with work. And so, I'm looking at hiring someone, but I'm not doing it quick. It's going to have to be the right person.

What do I look for? Someone who is sharp. By sharp, I mean they're right there, they're paying attention to what's going on around them.

They do need shop experience. They do need to have basic tool experience. We ... I mean all of us here ... do not want to have to teach someone how to use a table saw, how to keep their fingers out of the blade. That's the sort of thing that can be learned in a voc-tech class. We're looking for people where we can talk about higher-level stuff with.

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No one's built chairs before, you know. You have to go to China to find many people that have built chairs. That's where all the furniture's being manufactured now.

People who like to work. That's a tough call, you know. You're really taking a chance on people. Some people just appear to be very mellow and they're just kind of bopping along, sliding through life. "Everything's OK, nothing bugs me." I get a bit suspicious right then and there, because, well, it's a fine attitude, but that's not what we're looking for here.

Ideally what I'm looking for is someone who has the basic shop skills. Someone who can get along with other people. We've had friction in here, people problems. Nothing's blown up but we once had a person working here where no one wanted to have to work around him, or say anything to him. So I'm looking for people that are pleasant.

But, someone who's excited at the thought of making furniture. And it gets to be *drudgery*, it gets to be hard work. But still, in the end, you can see what you've done. So, I'm looking for people who want to see the results of what they're doing, and want to see things get better.

HD: In terms of competition, where does that put you, when you're looking for highly-skilled workers, versus larger manufacturers who may be hiring lowered-skilled ... you mentioned before, a lot of immigrant labor that comes in maybe don't have the same sort of skills as your employees ... where does that put you in terms of competition?

GA: Well, I don't see a lot of competition. Everything's in competition with everything now, but I don't see a lot of competition. Because we're small, we're very small, and there are many people who really would much rather work for a small outfit than a large one.

Right there, it's pretty self-selecting. Those are the people that we're looking for, the people that aren't looking for a large outfit to get lost in. So I see a difference. I'm not able to offer some of the pay and benefits that, say, the refineries can. But I like to think that I offer more flexibility and much more responsiveness, and respect for the individual.

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So I like to think that there's not a lot of competition. It's like anything in marketing, it's a matter of finding the [right] person.

HD: Is it also that there's not a lot of competition because your product is so unique?

GA: Well, it's furniture. There's not a lot of furniture being made, particularly in this level. We're in the stratosphere. Well, maybe not in the stratosphere, but we're starting to push towards that.

So there are a lot of people that want to build furniture, and they come in and say, "Oh, I really want to work here." I had a guy stop in just last week. He was from Minnesota. I'd talked to him at the St. Paul show, and he was looking at relocating out here. And he was a database programmer or something and he wanted to do a career change.

And I said, "Well, great, stop in. I'm not hiring." And he did stop in, and I looked at him and in my mind, I just ... it's like looking for a retailer. I can tell by just taking one look if it's just definitely not going to work or if it's worth pursuing.

Well, I took one look and my first reaction was no, this wasn't going to work. The guy was mellow, he was ... just, there's a persona of people who work in a shop and work well. And I'm one of them. I'm the person that started it all, so you could say I'm the archetype there. And if you talk to everyone back there, you'll see the same thing, just in the way they look at things and approach things.

And so it's really a lot of trying to guess on personality, trying to tell the future. Resumés don't tell it. I ask for a resumé from everyone, partly just to see if they'll meet my request. [chuckles] But also, to have something to work off of.

But resumes, in this line of work, they don't tell it. [But] if something's more technical, it does. It's critically necessary, but here, I can look at things, and I can say that if a person worked in construction, they know how to work, they know how to step on the gas when it's necessary, because you have to do

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that in that industry. Same thing with restaurant work. I notice that, too. They know how to step on the gas when necessary, and do those spurts.

So, those are the sorts of things I look for. [laughs]

HD: You mentioned something before about how you're "in the stratosphere". What did you mean by that?

GA: Price. Quality and price. We're asking \$500 to \$700 for a dining chair. If you were to survey what's out there, it'd be way above most everything that's out there.

The value's there. Our sales show that. And the people who work here can tell you how the value is there. We're real efficiency nuts, in doing everything as well as we can. And so there is no waste of time in there. Without a doubt, the value is there, but it's way, way beyond most people, even if they have the means. Many people just would say to me, "No way!" [laughter]

HD: So how do you make your products attractive, in order to get your sales out there?

GA: Well, OK. Number one is comfort in a chair. Number two is design. There's a certain look. The design is not way out there.

I just came back from two weeks in California, going to lots of galleries and being at the American Crafts Council show. In visiting stores, I like to think mine's the best, but there's better stuff out there. Those rocking chairs cost \$5,000. And they do have someone who's whittling away at them for weeks on end. You know, the guy that's selling that \$5,000 rocking chair is probably only making \$3.00 an hour! [Because] that kind of attention's gone in, hand carving and such.

We're not going to that extent, because the customer base for that is so miniscule. We're going for mid-top end. Furniture that – well, it seems like a lot of money, but it's affordable. A dining set of mine typically will run the customer \$6,000 [with table]. It's quite a bit of money for a dining set, but people do look at it and figure out if they want to do it.

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I was at the Philadelphia furniture show in May and Tony Kenworth came all the way from Australia with his six chairs and table, and he was asking \$35,000 for it. He sold it that weekend. You can do it. You can do it.

It's hard for me to imagine how much time went into making them. They were gorgeous. I looked at his time in it, and I say the value's there. But how many people are going to spend \$35,000 on a dining set?

So there are a lot of people in this country and a lot of people in the world, and one-tenth of 1 percent are still a lot of people who are going to look at your furniture. But they're really picky at that price point. People are far less picky at your lower price points.

And sometimes I think we're in a service industry here, holding people's hands and working with them on this and that, and giving them advice. Getting descriptions about their dining room, and then I'm giving them advice about what would look go in it. And I don't do well with things that are spoken to me and described. I can't figure out what it looks like and I have to come up with something??!

But they want to feel like they received a diagnosis from the doctor, not the nurse. [laughs] And so, I do it for them. And I feel perfectly fine about doing that, because I know our furniture is excellent value. And I make sure it's excellent value. Anyone who's looking at that realm has been looking at other stuff, too, and they see our furniture and they look at the prices and they say, "Yes, this is an excellent value."

There's a lot of stuff out there that's overpriced. Just because there's a price tag on something, doesn't mean it's selling. [laughter] So don't price yourself up there based on what stores have on their floor. Frequently, they have expensive stuff on the floor, and then they have their items that they sell their tonnage on, and they're making all their money on that. So you need to kind of find out what's really moving out there, what people really want. What they're willing to pay.

HD: Do you find that one of the more difficult things for you to deal with personally is dealing with the customer?

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GA: Not anymore. It used to be. It used to be murder. It used to be awful. I'd have one meeting with one customer and I'd be a basket case for three days. I'd go home and tell my wife, and I would just moan and whine about it. And "Ohhh," this and that. And, "They *asked* for something!" I couldn't stand the idea of people *asking* for things! I didn't know how to deal with it.

But I've really become quite the sales animal, and I've learned that I *can* do it. And because of my position as the designer and the company owner, I can do it well. And I'm feeling a little bit cornered on that, because it's not what I want to be doing. And I've gotten to where I actually enjoy talking to people. I enjoy talking to people.

And when they ask for things, well, I just come up with more ideas for them. And when they ask for a cut on money, I think real quickly, what can I throw in, you know, what kind of bone can I throw them? You know, "Oh, I'll upgrade your upholstery fabric," you know. [laughs] Or, "We'll pay the residential shipping fee on the thing," you know, small stuff like that.

I finally realized, this summer, it's not what people pay so much as it's how much money they think they saved in the transaction. [laughter] That's what they really remember.

HD: What do you think made that switch, from going from someone, you were saying, where it was *murder* to be able to talk to these customers, to *have* to talk to these customers, to now, you enjoy it? What happened in-between that time?

GA: Good question. I don't know. I really don't know. [laughs] Because when I started this, I was *such* an introvert. I wanted to be left alone. I was out in the woods working alone.

Well, first off, I had to deal with galleries and their demands. And frequently, those people who are running galleries or stores, they are people-persons, people-oriented people, and they have no problem with asking for what they want. No problem at all. And so that kind of broke me in.

And then I've realized that as my costs keep climbing and I haven't been able to raise prices – I'm about to, but I haven't been able to raise prices really the

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past year and a half. Because of the way the economy is, I've felt like I haven't been able to, though maybe I could have. And I've been squeezing this business, trying to hold my income, or make as much as I did two or three years ago even.

I've realized what's really the answer has been to, just in the short term, is to sell retail, and get the retail share. [But] the wholesale business is just, more and more every year, cutting it closer and closer and closer. The business makes payroll but, quite frankly, it doesn't leave [a lot] over for me. At all.

And so, searching for that extra shot in the arm has been retail. And going to the first retail shows, and dealing with the public, and kind of being thrown into the lion's cage ... because at the show, you've got a lot of people. And a lot of them are experts, collectors, and they know what they want to find out, and they want answers.

And so, it's going to the shows. Watching people. You know, virtually everybody at the shows are wonderful people. And many of those people feel like friends. They haven't even bought from me and they feel like friends. And I can sit there and I can talk to them about my fears and what I didn't like, just kind of talking my way into it. Working into it.

[And] studying sales people. Studying what needs to be done, looking at human nature. As an introspective person, making a study of humans and how they behave, and what they want in a transaction. And starting to respond to that.

Also, people are looking for connection in a retail sale. They want a connection – they're not buying a razor or a toothbrush. They want a connection to the person who made it. They want to feel like they're valued in this.

And finding out what's right. And you automatically get reinforced when you do the right thing. Just growing with it. You can learn anything. [chuckles]

HD: So now that you're selling your own furniture retail, how has your relationship with your customers changed, and how does this affect, if at all, the way you're manufacturing the furniture now?

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GA: It hasn't really affected the way we're manufacturing it. We're going for the same levels of quality. When I worked out of my garage for years, I feel like there was a level of detail in there that perhaps isn't there now. We used an oil finish, which is much more work.

But I found that the person who did not make the furniture has a very difficult time seeing that, and so I had to let go of it. And it's been very difficult, but I've had to make some choices. There were some forks in the road. Which way do you want to go? Keep working out of your garage and just selling stuff wholesale? Or do you want to go somewhere else with it? And I've seen that the opportunity is there to do something with this operation.

HD: You were just talking about making furniture in your garage. When did that start happening? You were talking before about you were working for a cabinet maker. Can you tell me about the progression of going from working for a cabinet maker to opening up your own company?

GA: Yeah. Well, it wasn't really a progression, or even a sequence. They interfaced a lot. Because back in the early [19]80s, working for cabinet shops, you were doing well if you got twelve months of employment out of them. And so, I had time off, and I didn't have any kids. So I had time.

And I built a shop out on Wahl Road, and I worked out of the shop. It was very small. I slowly accumulated tools. I have none of the original tools anymore. Well, maybe a hammer made it through somewhere. [chuckles]

And then I moved into town. Built a larger shop that was still nothing more than a very large, large garage, 800 square feet. Built a campus of buildings off of that. Got to be quite the mess visually, you know, shacks around.

HD: At that point, were you working just by yourself?

GA: No, at that point I had two employees. I had two full-time employees by the time that era ended. And then five years ago, I bought this building.

I'd come up with the Pacific dining chair and I developed that with a retailer down in Seattle, McKinnon Furniture. And their designers put a lot of input

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into that, sent prototypes back and forth. So, there was some hashing out there. So it was what fit them well. It was what they needed to sell.

I can't recommend that process enough. To this day, I like soliciting input from my retailers. I have some that are not micromanagers and they'll say, "Well, you figure it out. You've always done a good job in the past."

But I have others that say, "Well, if I had my choice, I would always have this ... or that." And that's invaluable, to go with their – go off of what they say. Do not fall into the trap of I'm the craftsman so I know what's best.

Well, I do know what's best as far as making a chair that's going to last. I do know what's best as far as proportion. I do know what's best as far as lines. *But* I don't always have the best idea. And other people feed me good ideas. And to be open to that, I hope I didn't just contradict myself there, in words. I'm not sure how to make it more clear, but to always take the input.

I was down in Corte Madiera [CA] talking to the fellow who owned the rocking chair store down there. They sell nothing but rocking chairs. And we were looking at the chairs and he says, "Well, I don't like the top of the rear leg and the arm together. I don't think they work together." And I told him, I said, "Well, there's no accounting for taste, Matt." [chuckles]

But he's very outspoken. Retailers tend to do that – they speak their mind, as long as they feel they're not going to alienate you too bad. But then I started giving it thought, and it became another design element. I realized, well, this is what someone *else* sees. And so I'm keeping that element in my mind as I work on the development of the easy chair.

The seat depth. I'm tall, I'm six feet tall. I have long legs. I think a deeper seat would be in order, but my retailers tell me no. They said I'm going to cut out 50 percent of the population out there. And the most important 50 percent, too! Don't do it! [laughs] And besides, tall people do not need a deeper seat. They think they do but they don't need it. A shorter person can't sit in a deep-seated chair. A tall person can sit in a shallow chair. So build a shallow chair.

So I do it, and it works.

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I'm trying to think of more instances like that. For instance, you have to keep a notebook. You have to keep a notebook for all this. Like I say, [I] just spent two weeks in California talking to retailers of all kinds, and it's just the most mind-expanding thing you can do, is to take note of everything they say.

And pay real close attention to all of their little points they bring up that agree. If this guy brings up the fact that the shipping is too high, and this guy does, too, over here – well, you'd better look at it really closely, and see what you can do.

It would make sense to come up with one shipping price that I charge everybody. Or maybe have two, east of the Mississippi and west of the Mississippi. It would be much simpler. But my retailers all say no, that's unfair, because I may be the person who pays too much when you average up.

The retail customer is the same thing. They like seeing it down to the penny on their shipping price. They like to feel like, oh, I'm getting what I paid for. The end consumer does not like paying for shipping because they don't get to hold it. [chuckles] They get it once and it's gone, and they receive no more benefit from it.

So anything to make it seem like they're paying less shipping. We're gonna throw that in, you know. At shows I offer free shipping. Well, no one wants to pay freight. Because they don't need it, right? You could drive your car up to Washington and get it! [laughter] Even though, for \$84.00, it's worth it.

HD: So it sounds like a lot of the challenges that you face have to do with finances and pricing. Would you say that's correct?

GA: That's my world now. Cash flow. Saving a percent here and there. Because costs have gone up so much. They keep going up. So, you're having to deal with that.

It's the strength of our system, I think, that we shave everything down so close. We have to because of the competition of what else is out there. And

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the consumer gets a better deal out of it, you know. The consumer doesn't overpay, as a rule.

HD: Do you find that having to spend so much time on financing things, and to make sure your customer has a reasonable price in their eyes, do you find that that detracts or distracts you from doing what you really want to do, which is the stuff in the shop?

GA: Uh-huh. Absolutely. *Absolutely*. Right now, I would like – my next step is I'd like to get someone in here who takes care of the orders. I'm just now starting to become aware of how much time I spend on orders.

When I get that fax, entering it into the system. Confirming it. Having them say, "Oh, that's not what I meant." Or, "You got it wrong." Confirming it again. Talking on the phone. Shipping time. Chasing them for their money. [chuckles] I would like to get someone to do that, so I can concentrate on the designs.

Also, the shop is getting a bit worn around the edges, with machinery breakdowns, and that seems to fall in my lap.

And developing new items. Which is one of our challenges. We have an incredible amount of business right now, and I would like to get another shop location. Keep this location, make it primarily a showroom for the retail end.

In order to take that big step to another shop location, you know, we've got a lot of business, and we're not really handling it in this location. We don't really have enough business to fill up a 10,000-square-foot shop. It's a classic dilemma.

So, one of the things I need to do is, one, basically I need to whip these machines in shape. Get 'em on their feet again. There's a couple things in the process where I think it could be improved. Not too much, you know. My guys, they take care of that. They've got quite the handle on it.

I need to come up with new designs. Which is a thorn in the side. For each new design we do, it confuses everything else. However, I can't grow the business without new designs. I can't fill up that new shop. And, in particular,

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the retail firm here. We've got four chairs. We can't run a retail firm with four chairs.

Now, I'm starting to bring in tables made in Vermont. The first one'll be coming into Seattle in just a couple days, here. So at least we can sell things, even if we don't make them.

So that's one avenue. That's one avenue, but still, I'm running out of time. I'm running out of time. I, you know, I just can't get it all done. And it's a dilemma.

HD: Can you describe to me what your average workweek is like? Having to balance designing, in-shop stuff, and the accounting aspects of the business?

GA: The average workweek does not involve any design. The average workweek is dealing with orders, communicating with my bookkeeper, who organizes the office. We have to communicate on a lot of stuff.

Overseeing everything. Keeping an eye on quality. Making sure the orders and everything else is flowing properly. Putting out fires. Answering the phone. Answering faxes. When the power feeder breaks down, I have to stop everything, work on that for three hours. Then everything's behind.

So I'm in a tough time right now. I'm here late a lot. I'm here on the weekends all the time. And I'm ready not to do that any more. [laughter]

HD: When you do get a chance to design, about how long does it take from first conceiving of a piece of furniture, like a chair, to the time that you can actually get it out on the floor in the showroom?

GA: I would have to say it takes six weeks, six to eight weeks. It does not take all that time, but you can't rush those things. You have to do the work, but then you need time to look at it. You need time away from it to come back and look at it from a fresh view.

You need to get it out somewhere else, out of the shop, and get other people's opinions. And you need to take an extra day, when you're feeling unsettled about the design, you need to take an extra day and not think about

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it. And then – *aha!* It occurs to you what it was that wasn't quite right you need to change on it.

So ... it's a red flag for me if I feel that I have to design for a deadline.
[chuckles]

HD: Can you talk about the things that you find exceptionally challenging right now, in manufacturing?

GA: What do I find exceptionally challenging? ... I'm feeling pretty comfortable with that. Like I said, I have a great crew. They've got it down.

Lumber is not a commodity, and at times it's challenging to get what you want. We always end up getting it, but it leaves me feeling like I've got to carry more inventory than I'd like to, just to have it on hand. And even then, sometimes we have a squeeze on that.

I feel very challenged on coming up with a person to hire for the shop that's going to do a good job, since last time we did that, it did not work out. Well, it wasn't a big failure or anything, but it just didn't work. Wasn't what we wanted.

A big challenge is minimizing the amount of scurrying around with the product towards the end – in other words, re-working. I don't know if you're familiar with the Toyota production system? Make it right the first time and it goes out the door. Well, that's what we're always shooting for, you know. Do it right the first time, you know. You don't make a part and then hand-fit it in there; you make it fit the first time.

That's a challenge. I think everyone here has a good handle on that. But I know there's some big steps we can take. We're limited by our space here. We have a real constraint there. We can only do so much within the walls of this building, and there's nowhere to expand here. So that's a very huge challenge.

A big challenge for me is just time management; understanding that there are a lot of projects I start, and even though I have good intentions, they don't get done, because I get sidetracked and something else is more important.

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HD: We just have a few minutes left. Can you tell me briefly where you expect this company to go in the future?

GA: I'm looking for growth. Not enormous growth. I get too many flyers on auctions from companies that are going out of business. I would like to see some growth, though, but we need a larger space.

I would like having a retail operation. I feel like I've really gotten into the groove of what people want, of dealing with people, and recognizing a good store when I see it. And therefore, I've got the system. I feel like I've kind of got the franchise on that now. So it seems like a real opportunity.

I'd love to do all our business right here in Bellingham, out the front door.

I love doing the shows. As much as they're a tremendous amount of work, the people are *great*. I mean, they are so interested and supportive. And being with other craftspeople is invaluable. Hanging out with them for a couple of days, it's real intense but it really gives you a shot in the arm. I think everyone needs to do that, whatever profession they're in.

Lately, I've had a real shot in the arm with increased dealers, with the wholesale business. And that's really exciting. But I realize that I'm going to cut our throat by pursuing that too much. Because it's like shaving with a really sharp knife. You have that big vein right there, and one slip and you'd bleed to death.

So that's kind of scary right there. Just all the extra costs of long-distance business.

HD: So it's basically expansion and growth?

GA: Expansion and growth. I would like to be doing more designs. That's ... like anyone in a small business, that's what I got into it for and that's not what I'm doing now. I like doing the design and I like spending a lot of time on it and refining it.

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And I like refining the process, the manufacturing process. It's just endlessly fascinating for me. So I'd like to be doing that more. Instead of just pushing papers and leaving notes in my bookkeeper's in-basket. [laughter] Strolling around with a clipboard.

HD: Well, thank you very much for talking to us today. I think we'll end it there.

GA: Well, thank you.

End of Analog Audio Tape 1 of 1 for September 9, 2003, Side B

END OF INTERVIEW WITH GREG AANES ON SEPTEMBER 9, 2003