

Stidham Cabinet, Inc. celebrating 50th year with improved technology

■ Report courtesy of Southeast KY Economic Development Corp.

James Stidham enjoys a good challenge.

As the CEO and founder of a successful 50-year-old custom cabinet and millwork business, the Laurel County native has faced many challenges. However, it's his desire to meet or exceed those more demanding tasks that has kept the company growing and diversifying while providing the same quality, precision and care since it opened its doors in 1975.

"We love a challenging job," Stidham said with a smile. "It makes us work smarter, not harder, keeps us looking for ways to save time and helps us eliminate the competition."

Stidham Cabinet, Inc. is a technology-driven business with a small-town feel and personalized customer service. Its reputation is built on decades of planning, diversification and plain old hard work.

The increasing use of technology has played a pivotal role in the company's success. Over the years, the company has invested in several key pieces of machinery to enhance its automation.

"Over the years, we have continued to upgrade our processes and bought the equipment to go along with these upgrades," Stidham said. "All of our processes and equipment throughout the plant were state-of-the-art and leading-edge technology-wise, except our finishing process."

Stidham's most recent challenge was to reduce finishing time to complete contracts faster and take on new work. His newest equipment purchase will improve the finishing department's precision, quality and time. The CEFLA flatline finishing machine has an oscillating spray coater, which enables fast color changes and even coating, along with infrared dryers that enable shorter dry times on cabinet doors and millwork.

"It's making all the difference," Stidham said. "We have been looking to upgrade this process for years but didn't have the money to make this big move all at once."

Two organizations, whose respective missions are to help small businesses grow in Kentucky, partnered to fund Stidham's most recent investment.

Stidham received a grant from the University of Louisville's Kentucky Manufacturing Extension Partnership's (MEP) Catalyst Equipment Match (CEM) program. This program provides up to a 50 percent match for investments in capital equipment and next-generation technologies.

"The CEM program was developed to help small and mid-sized Kentucky manufacturers offset just enough of their costs to allow for growth and expansion," said Scott Broughton, executive director of Kentucky MEP. "Stidham Cabinets is a perfect example of the type of company CEM was meant

for. They needed help, and we were delighted to have them in the program."

Stidham says the MEP grant has been invaluable to his small business and its growth.

"It's been a real game changer," Stidham said. "With the grant, we are comfortable with the balance of debt and payments."

The family chose to work with the regional nonprofit business lender, the Southeast Kentucky Economic Development Corporation (SKED), to fund the equipment purchase. The Stidhams have been working with SKED since 2000.

He said working with SKED has made a big difference in their bottom line.

"Usually, SKED's interest rate is favorable, the red tape for the loan is much less, and there is usually some helpful advice or information that comes along with the loan," said Stidham. "They constantly encourage us to grow and do better."

SKED Director of Lending Bob Burgess said helping the Stidhams purchase this new technology has been rewarding.

"James and his staff are dedicated to excellence in their production, Burgess said. "This new equipment will enable them to do more work and increase their bottom line. We are pleased to have played a role in seeing that happen."

The family-owned and operated 55,000-square-foot facility is located near his childhood home and not far from his home on Nursery Road in southern Laurel County, Kentucky.

The Laurel County business has established itself quietly and skillfully over the years. Initially, it focused on residential business, developing new skills and customers with each home. It has expanded to providing custom and commercial cabinetry and casework for million-dollar contracts with government entities, athletic departments, medical offices, banks, entertainment venues, and more.

Some 43 men and women are employed at Stidham Cabinets, Inc. Stidham remains active in the company's day-to-day operations. He prefers to lead rather than push his employees to excellence, he said.

"It feels good to have succeeded with hard work and being blessed all these years. I am thankful for all the workers and customers who have contributed to our success," Stidham said. "We have many long-term relationships that have developed over the years. Our first contractor continues to use us for his projects."

But once, this success was only a dream of Stidham's.

He began building his company, working on a financed Sears table saw in his home garage. At the time, he could only dream of owning a "million-dollar business" to support his growing family. With his wife, Carolyn, at his side, he took the skills he'd acquired



Family business: (L-R) Vice President Stephen Davis, President/CEO James Stidham, secretary/treasurer Carolyn Stidham and Vice President Jimmy Stidham.

working for another cabinet maker and set the course for his current multi-million-dollar company.

With two small children at home, the Stidhams struggled to balance family and work life. But they were building their dream, so each new job brought them joy, satisfaction and hope for the future.

Their son, Jimmy, grew up in the business. Today, he's vice president and has witnessed every possible challenge and successful expansion at the company. He is involved in daily operations, estimating, project management and assisting any team member on the shop floor.

As a youngster, his first job was to help bolt the countertops to the cabinets his dad produced.

"I crawled inside the cabinets to help bolt the top to the cabinet. I was the only one small enough to fit inside. You could say that job was custom-made for me," Jimmy said, smiling.

In the 1990s, James and Carolyn's son-in-law, Stephen Davis, joined the business. Today, he's a vice president who oversees the daily operation of the company's sales staff. Steve works closely with the team of designers and helps on the shop floor, when needed.

Carolyn manages the finances of the business as its secretary/treasurer.

"Nothing we do here is cookie-cutter," she said. "Most everything we do is one-of-a-kind."

"Before purchasing the new equipment, we were finishing the same basic way that we did 50 years ago, Stidham explained. "With this equipment, we now have the entire finishing process up to the same level as the rest of our plant."

He added that the finishing team can now clean, paint, sand, and seal 50 cabinet doors in an hour. Before this machine, that task took 10 hours of manual labor.

But this new automated equipment won't cost anyone at Stidham Cabinet

their job.

"We've bought new equipment over the years to help meet customer demand," Stidham said. "This new automation won't take anyone's job; it just allows us to move people around and take on more work orders."

Employee training and cross-training are essential to the company's continuity.

"Our goal is for each employee to spend 80 to 85 percent of their time doing the same job and the remaining 15 to 20 percent cross-training," Stidham said. "It improves everyone's productivity."

Stidham's certifications and awards prove the company's quality of work. It's certified premium grade by the Architectural Woodworking Industry (AWI), the governing body for standards in woodworking in the woodworking industry, and the Forest Stewardship Council, confirming it meets the standards for responsible forest management. All its residential cabinets are certified by the Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association, the governing body quality in kitchen and bath cabinets.

The Stidhams have completed work at the Laurel and Whitley County Judicial Centers, the University of Kentucky, the University of Tennessee, the University of Virginia, the University of Georgia, Vanderbilt University, the University of the Carolinas, Eastern Kentucky University, Lexington Medical Clinic, Lexington Orthopedic Clinic, Pikeville Medical Center and The Mint in Williamsburg. Stidham Cabinet, Inc. has completed some cabinetry and woodworking for Forcht banks, Whitaker Banks, Commercial Banks, Pikeville National and others.

The company's woodworking expertise at The Mint Cumberland Gaming Hall in Williamsburg, Ky., earned it an AWI Award of Excellence.

Learn more about the Stidhams and their work at stidhamcabinet.com.

SHERMAN: SB 181 has been a hot topic lately

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ongoing lines of communication between ourselves, our summer intern Bella Morin, and her sponsor down at Williamsburg Independent School. We had all agreed to communicate via group text throughout the remainder of the summer period when it comes to sharing info for story assignments, coordinating transportation, setting up potential meetings, and anything else of importance that might come up between now and the end of the internship. With the implementation of SB 181, however, we had to pivot to using e-mail in order to be in compliance. It was a minor inconvenience, and in our case, things have pretty much proceeded without any issues whatsoever. Things may not be as easy in the hypothetical examples used above, though.

Again, I've not read the entire bill. I am not an expert on this subject, so I am interested to know just how far the restrictions on e-communications go. For example, I'd like to know what the specifics are as it pertains to social media. Is it that a school employee simply cannot follow a student on social media, and vice versa? If so, I think that is reasonable. However, if a student makes a post about some accomplishment of theirs, and an employee of the school decides to simply like the post or leave a comment saying "congratulations," then is that a violation? It appears that could be the case, and if so, that seems a tad unreasonable to me.

This takes me back to that

"hazy middle ground" that I mentioned near the start of this column. I think that we will find out in the very near future that there is a difference between theory and practice when it comes to this particular piece of legislation, and I wouldn't be surprised to see it get tweaked in future sessions.

In the meantime, I vow to look deeper into the bill itself so that I can be better informed on exactly what it is designed to accomplish and how it plans to accomplish those goals. I invite anyone out there to shoot me an e-mail containing your thoughts on the matter, including any clarifications or criticisms about what I have said here in this column. If you do decide to reach out, and you'd like us to consider your submission as a future "Letter to the Editor" entry, please be sure to keep it to 500 words or less and include your name and a contact number. The number will not be published, but we will use it to confirm with you that you are okay with us running your words in print.

This is a topic that a lot of people are talking about and dealing with right now, which is why I wanted to go ahead and try to weigh in, even though my personal understanding of the situation is, admittedly, not perfect. How will things go from here? Only time will tell, but I have noticed at least one online petition circulating that asks the Kentucky General assembly to not enforce SB 181 until it can be reviewed and amended during the 2026 legislative session. The petition had just under 1,200 signatures as of Tuesday morning.

Classifieds

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