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Inclusivity at the heart of custom furniture company

By: Michaela Paukner | July 24, 2019 5:00 pm



Photo by Audrey Nowakowski

The products at Gear Grove, a custom-furniture company in Milwaukee, are made from the heart at a company with a heart. Its founders, Lyle Stoflet Jr. and Tom Daugherty, take people who might have had a hard time finding employment and find them jobs they often end up loving.

Stoflet Jr. and Daugherty started Gear Grove in 2012. They found employees through human-resources firms that worked with state programs for people with disabilities. They said they had great success early on with people from various backgrounds. Today, one-third of Gear Grove’s staff has a disability.

“If you can put someone with a disability in the right job, they can be unbelievably successful,” said Stoflet Jr. “If we find someone who we think will get along with everyone else, we’ll hire them and then figure out what they’re perfect for.”

Finding the right fit can take a few tries. But Stoflet Jr. and Daugherty don’t give up. They said one of their employees was someone who, on paper, would typically have a hard time finding a job. He tried out a variety of roles at Gear Grove before he started running CNC programming and working directly with customers. His commitment was obvious, and he continues to go above and beyond in his third year at the company.

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“I have the understanding that anyone can do anything,” Daugherty said. “We’ll give the opportunity to someone who’s willing to do a job. We’re willing to look at them regardless of what their background is.”

In addition to Gear Grove, Stoflet Jr. and Daugherty run Containers Up, a design and rental company for upcycled shipping containers; and Stratus Industries, which does CNC machining, contract manufacturing, kitting and fulfillment. All three operate in the same building, and employees work on projects for each of them.

“Part of the uniqueness of our staff is that we don’t just do one thing,” said Stoflet Jr. “We have an incredibly diverse amount of projects and customers, so our staff gets to work on a broad variety of projects.”

Most employees appreciate the variety, especially because they’re learning and working with people they like.

“We want an atmosphere where everyone enjoys who they’re with,” said Daugherty. “It’s a good culture and a good family. Regardless of your background, just show up and be part of what we’re doing, and we’ll continue to grow and do cool things.”