

GUARDIANS

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Schools don’t have those kinds of budgets, and the options he was finding didn’t cover three sides of a desk.

At that point, Wunderlich said he reached out to four of his friends, who through the years had talked about doing some kind of business together. Those discussions led in May to the founding of Desk Guardian.

The five men have been friends for 15 years and are between the ages of 33 and 35. In addition to Wunderlich, they are: Matt Hankins, Landry Sorbel, Jon Woodrome and CJ Yancey. All are originally from Metro East — mostly St. Clair County — and most still live there. Two of them met while working at the movie theater in Fairview Heights, and mutual friendships eventually drew them all together.

All of them “share a passion for entrepreneurship and helping the community,” Wunderlich said.

Desk Guardian was formed to provide protective desk equipment solutions to help students safely return to the classroom. The idea wasn’t so much about making money as it was performing a civic duty. The result, though, has been a sense of fulfillment for the partners.

“We made the determination early on that we’re happy with smaller profits in return for getting the satisfaction of helping out the community,” he said.

Each of the men brings something to the table. Wunderlich, for instance, is a CPA and serves as CFO. Sorbel is an IT digital marketing guy. Two are in engineering.

“Everyone is bringing a different background,” Wunderlich said.

From their first conversations, the men researched what it would mean to start a company, how they could procure materials, who could do the customization and installation. They learned as they went — even as school systems themselves were trying to figure out what they were going to do.

Once the group had concept designs, the members started to reach out to suppliers. At first, they purchased polycarbonate products off Amazon.

“What we found was that due to COVID, a lot of supplies weren’t out there. Inventories were low and pricing had skyrocketed. One of the thicknesses we were looking at using they quoted us a lead time of December of 2021 before we could get any polycarbonate,” Wunderlich said. That was back in June.

“We thought maybe we should go thinner and we found a couple of places where we could get 1/16th’s inch (roughly the thickness of a standard carboard box). We originally tried going directly to the suppliers. What we found was that a lot of quantities were already promised to the fabricators. We had to then go to the fabricators and were fortunate to find a



Transparent shields in place in an area classroom.

couple local.”

The materials are either polycarbonate or polypropylene. The former is more durable, but the latter is much cheaper and is a viable option in the right cases.

Polycarbonate shields are crystal clear, and shatter and heat resistant, compared to, say, acrylics, which when shattered have sharp edges and can catch fire easier.

Polycarbonate is used in a variety of fields. If it’s thick enough, it’s bulletproof, and it has applications in the medical, space and automotive industries, among others.

The product cost depends on the grade of materials and type of project.

“If they are looking at our polycarbonate version, they’d be looking in the low \$30 per desk. Our polypropylene are \$9.99 per desk,” he said.

By comparison, an office supply store generally runs significantly higher and does not offer the same customization.

“We had one school with quite a few desks. They were going to go to a third-party Amazon seller and they were going to spend over \$60,000 on student sneezeguards. We got it for under \$14,000,” he said. “That’s more than \$45,000 that they can go spend on other things needed in that school.”

With the supply issues basically figured out, the group reached out for customers. The first turned out to be Wolf Branch Elementary School in Belleville, which had meaning for Wunderlich, who attended the school as a boy.

Wolf Branch’s current superintendent, Scott Harres, was Wunderlich’s fifth-grade science teacher.

“We did their entire office space with shields to go around the executive and nursing offices,” Wunderlich said.

Desk Guardian’s first large order was Rossman School in Creve Coeur, a private school. Team members outfitted the entire school, individual desks and circular tables.

“In terms of school needs we can get pretty creative,” Wunderlich said. “The products are cut and customized to fit.”

Since the first customers, Desk Guardian has made its way to seven Metro East schools and eight states across the country. Most have been private schools, but more schools of all types are in the pipeline.

The company is a group effort, with each man having his own day job and getting up early and working late to do tasks for Desk Guardian, from answering emails to making calls. There is no central base for the company and inventory is obtained as needed.

Customers were reached by a lot of cold calling and emails, which led to other referrals. Many schools contacted back in the summer wanted to be recontacted once they had a better idea of the virus’ direction. Some of those recontacts are now underway.

“We’re finding that a lot of states are making funding for schools to purchases PPE type equipment,” he said.

In the second week of June, things “exploded” with a massive influx of work in California, which was returning to in-person classes.

“We were getting 80 phone calls a day, wanting quotes and different proposals. We weren’t prepared for that influx, so that was the beginning of the craziness,” he said.

They have a joint email system that allows them to share communications, and they added a phone service, Google Voice, which offers a rollover system that calls one person and rolls to the next when the

first is busy.

The men have the equipment to do customized bending and installation in local schools, but because of COVID travel restrictions, they are not going to customers out of state. Those products are done by the fabricators and shipped directly to the customer with detailed instructions on assembly.

“For them, it’s a few minutes to install. There are three clips that go on the bottom, take off the protective film coating, and you’re all set ready to go. If a student happens to bump the Desk Guardian it won’t fall off since it’s locked into place.”

There is usually a 10- to 14-day fabrication period, depending on the size of the order. It’s rare for one desk to be consistent throughout one school or district. And rare for all classrooms to look alike or have the same amount of space.

Offices also have unique differences. Some people want openings in the guards to be able to slide papers back and forth. Others want holes for laptop ports to go in and out, without having to take cords up and over the actual Guardian.

Wunderlich says he sees a future for the company, given the new worldwide concern, and three of the partners have a direct stake, given they have children in local schools.

“Somebody asked me where I thought we’d be in 10 years. I told him I honestly hope we’re not still doing this in 10 years. It would mean we have a new norm of what schools should look like,” Wunderlich said. “But the more I talk to teachers they sound like this could be longer term, much longer than we first thought.”

For more information on the business go to www.deskguardian.com.

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