



a dream come true

A couple's vision and hard work culminate in the creation of one of Southwestern Michigan's largest outdoor-living stores. **by KIMBERLY RODGERS** **photography by RACHEL SMITH**

Jack Kosin's dream of owning his own business was so important to him that he talked about it with his future wife, Ashleigh, on their second date. The two first met when they were attending Miami University, and their paths crossed again, a few years later, while both were living in Chicago, Illinois.

"I talked to Ashleigh, on the fire escape of her building, about my ideas of creating a business that helped people master the art of exterior relaxation and comfort," Jack says. The couple married in 2002, and almost six years after that fire-escape discussion, they founded Bell Tower Outdoor Living Company in Richland, Michigan. Staying true to Jack's initial

dream, Bell Tower's business motto, plan, and objective today are to help people master the art of outdoor relaxation, play, and comfort.

Jack and Ashleigh both grew up in the Midwest, and they both have lasting memories of summers playing on the water of the region's lakes and of carefree nights amusing themselves and their friends with games of ghost in the graveyard or kick the can. Now, the Kosins are able to offer people throughout Western Michigan the opportunity to create their own wonderful memories for themselves and their families.

To that end, included in Bell Tower's product lineup is one of the largest outdoor-furniture selections

in Southwestern Michigan, with offerings from top-quality manufacturers that include Homecrest, Seaside Casual, Telescope Casual, Woodard, Lloyd/Flanders, Eon, Oxford Garden, Gloster, and Barlow Tyrie.

Selling products that are made in the United States is important to the Kosins, and they try, whenever possible, to offer items that meet this goal. "We believe in supporting our country, so most of our furniture lines are made in the United States, and we do our best with accessories," Ashleigh says.

Maintaining an environmentally responsible lifestyle and representing companies that practice green initiatives are also integral parts of the Kosins'



philosophy. "We are selling products that are in keeping with our thought processes in life: those that are green, sustainable, and the best for the environment," Ashleigh says. Indeed, one of Bell Tower's most popular sellers is Envirowood (furniture made of high-quality, high-density plastic lumber) from Seaside Casual.

While casual furniture accounts for a large portion of the company's sales, Bell Tower also offers products for the physically active part of an outdoor lifestyle, including Backyard Adventures premium wooden playsets, trampolines by AlleyOop and JumpSport, and Bic Sport stand-up paddleboards. Sales of these products have grown steadily over the past three years.

Accessories are also a key part of Bell Tower's overall product mix. From umbrellas by Treasure Garden to hammocks by Hatteras—along with an array of bird feeders, outdoor rugs, throw pillows, garden art, fountains,

firepits, patio heaters, lanterns, candles, drinkware, dishes, coasters, napkins, and products from the Life is good® brand—Bell Tower offers all the extras needed to enjoy every room of the house, both indoors and outside.

The store's accessories (a large offering) are popular sellers throughout the entire year. Merchandising reflects year-long needs and is not overly focused on any holiday or season. In fact, Bell Tower has become a staple in the community for gifts for any occasion or holiday.

"Our philosophy, with our product lineup, has always been that whether you need a simple birthday gift or an entire patio set, you can rely on Bell

Tower for both. We try to create regular customers over a one-time experience," Ashleigh says.

A SUNNY SHOWROOM ALL YEAR

After starting their business online in 2008, the Kosins opened their first retail space in 2009. Their store was located in

Top left: Customers visit Bell Tower year-round for the store's large lineup of accessories, including items from the popular Life is good® brand.

Top: Bell Tower offers products for every part of an active outdoor lifestyle, including casual furniture, playsets, trampolines, and paddleboards.

Top right: Bell Tower's showroom is sunny, warm, and inviting all year, with an artful use of bright colors both inside and outside the store.

Left: The Kosin family

a small building at the main stoplight in Richland. While the space was in need of repair, it did provide Bell Tower with good visibility in town.

"We worked very hard to fix it up and create fun window and sidewalk displays, to let people know we were there and what we sold," Ashleigh says. With strong support from the community, the Kosins moved, in 2010, to Clocktower Green, a new boutique shopping destination in Richland.

Shoppers visiting Bell Tower's 3,000-square-foot showroom and its additional 4,000-square-foot exterior selling space are treated to a colorful visual experience that, Jack says, "puts a smile on their faces, even in the doldrums of winter. People think summer when they come into our store, and we are constantly told by visitors that our store is so bright and cheery."

The store's appealing atmosphere also helped Bell Tower win *Casual Living* Merchandising Awards for 2011 in the

From Action to Passion

by SHARON SANDERS

When businessman Joe Cooper bought a small company manufacturing outdoor cushions in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, seven years ago, he had no idea that his business venture would turn into his passion. Today, Cooper and his company, Over and Under, Inc., are on a mission to make the most comfortable, durable cushions on the market—while, at the same time, educating customers about the anatomy of a superior cushion.

"I believe that cushions are on their way to becoming the most important part of a piece of outdoor furniture," he says. When most people are asked what sets a good cushion apart from a great cushion, the typical answer is fabric. There is no challenging the fact that performance fabrics have helped change the face of outdoor cushions.

Cooper acknowledges (and embraces) the importance of fabric, yet he is also quick to tell people that it is only the beginning. When he purchased the company in 2004, Cooper quickly

decided that he was not satisfied with the cheap, low-quality cushions that the company had been making for years.

After some research, he discovered that there were no cushions on the market that met the standard he had in mind. "There was no one out there who really cared about finding a way to make a better cushion," he recalls, so he took it upon himself to transform Over and Under into a manufacturer that does care.

During his first year in business, Cooper was on a quest to uncover the formula for the perfect cushion. He basically came to three conclusions about what people wanted: Outdoor cushions had to last, dry quickly, and be extraordinarily comfortable. To those ends, Cooper developed what has become Over and Under's signature high-performance outdoor cushion.

He completely reinvented his manufacturing operation, retraining his staff to focus on quality (not speed or quantity). In just a few years, the company's cushions have

become a requested favorite of designers, manufacturers, and consumers across the United States.

ONE-OF-A-KIND CUSHIONS

Over and Under's breakthrough custom cushions start with the finest solution-dyed acrylic fabrics, which are sometimes further treat-

and annoying damp butt," Cooper says. Cushion construction includes many high-quality details that, in the end, are extremely important. For example, the cushions are always stitched with PTFE sewing thread, which is warranted to outlast even the fabric.

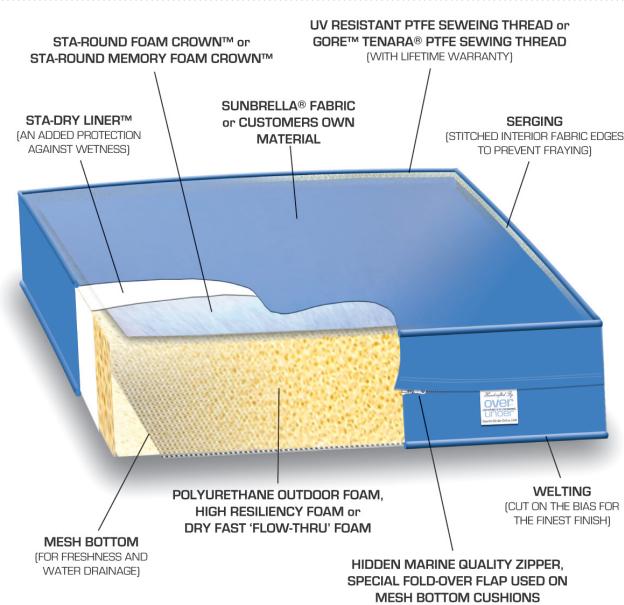
"Tearing seams are the first

used (with a foldover flap) to keep out water. Cooper did not stop there, however. He also learned that people were frustrated with cushions that looked nice on a showroom floor, but would compress and lose their new shape after only a few months.

Therefore, he created the ultimate comfort cushion, marketed as the high-performance plush outdoor cushion. It is designed with a soft, memory-foam crown situated on top of the highest-quality high-resiliency foam, and it is protected by plastic sheathing (and sometimes, an inner stay-dry liner). The resulting cushion is very heavy, is remarkably comfortable, and will remain like new for many years to come.

Cooper believes that there is a metamorphosis happening in the casual-living industry right now in the area of cushions, and he believes that Over and Under is positioned perfectly for the future. He is seeing a trend toward spending more on cushions—sometimes, even more than on furniture.

"People will spend twice as much money on a mattress as they do on the bed frame, and I think cushions are heading in the same direction," he predicts. "My challenge is always to be looking for a way to make a better cushion." ■



Over and Under high-performance plush outdoor cushion

ed with a waterproof coating or backing, such as Crypton® or Synergy. The company then uses reticulated flow-through foam (which aids in water drainage), and it incorporates a large, open-mesh fabric section strategically placed on the cushion's underside.

"They will dry in less than three hours, eliminating the unexpected

thing that will cause a consumer to replace cushions. Our thread is 10 times more expensive than the industry-standard polyester thread," Cooper explains. When the cushions feature welting, it is always cut on the bias.

The interior fabric edges are serged to prevent fraying, and a hidden, marine-quality zipper is

categories of best overall merchandising, single store, and best first-time entry. "We were thrilled and surprised we won the awards we did," Jack says.

Merchandising is focused on a wide variety of patio lines coordinated with high-quality, fun accessories. Tables are completely set, vibrantly colored throw pillows are on all the chairs, and garden art is hanging on the walls to help customers visually place the same items in their own homes. "I want people to see that they can take an entire setting home from our store today and have a cocktail party that night," Ashleigh says.

With a mission of helping people enjoy life more outdoors, Bell Tower provides many services to help customers achieve exactly that goal. They include outdoor-furniture inspection, assembly, and delivery; winter storage and restoration; and cleaning. Playset assembly and maintenance are also available, as well as on-site design consultation.

Though the goal is for shoppers to have a fun experience, overall, from the moment they walk through Bell Tower's doors, they are also greeted with exceptional service and advice. Ashleigh says, "Education is key, along with information on warranties, where the

product was made, and how you might spend more money (in the long run) purchasing a lower-quality item elsewhere."

She comments that one of her favorite things about selling Bell Tower's products is teaching people that sophisticated outdoor accessories can be used indoors in the winter and enjoyed all year long.

MARKETING THE BRAND

A major component of Bell Tower's overall marketing plan is the method that the Kosins use to promote the business. "I take a brand approach, over an advertising approach. We want to communicate that we are providing relaxation, comfort, and fun for the outdoors," Ashleigh says.

Newspaper advertising, in the first year of business, produced mediocre results. Dollars were then redirected to the placement of two ads (one focusing on the brand and one focusing on products) in a quarterly home/lifestyle magazine circulated throughout Western Michigan. The magazine is also placed in the store (with Bell Tower's information sticker on the cover) and given to customers.

Bell Tower has an informative and inviting website (www.btolc.com) filled with product information, company news, and history. Regular email messages communicating new information and sales are also sent to a large database of names. Online sales were strong during the first year of business, but for now, the focus will be on the brick-and-mortar operation.

Bell Tower does have a Facebook page; Jack comments, "We find that social media are a viable form of advertising to and communication with our customers, friends, and fans." Bell Tower also actively participates in the community through its involvement in a charity event for the benefit of the local school district.

The Kosins, though, are probably the best marketing for Bell Tower. Jack says, "The more business we do, the more we understand that we have a lot in common with our customers. We all really love the outdoors and living an *alfresco* lifestyle." Ashleigh adds, "We both quit our day jobs to start our dream jobs, and we are living a philosophy we truly believe in: We sell quality outdoor products, work hard, do the best we can, and have fun doing it." ■