

40 years of New Frontiers

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ALTON - A downtown business is turning 40 this year.

New Frontiers Home and Garden Furnishings, located at 101 W. Third Street, began its life at 554 East Broadway - the current location of Bottle and Barrel - as a place to make and buy handmade wooden furniture. Owner Ed Benz said he had been building outdoor Adirondack chairs in his father's garage in North St. Louis County. Word of his work got around, and Benz was tasked with making furniture for a new (for 1970s Alton) place called Tim Ballo's Palazzo, which is now Don & Penny's in Downtown Alton.

"There are still a few stools and a couple tabletops we built in there today," Benz said.

After outfitting the palazzo, Benz opened his small shop on Broadway. He sold some of his handmade stock to unfinished furniture vendors, and decided he himself could be such a vendor. Benz soon sold unfinished furniture from other manufacturers alongside what he built himself.

In 1987, Benz said the business moved to the current location downtown. That move was finalized in 1988. He said the move to the old Jupiter building was controversial at the time. Many people in Alton believed the old building should have been torn down to make room for additional parking. At that time, Benz said it had been unused for quite some time.

"We evolved a lot, and now mostly sell finished goods," Benz said.

Benz never gave up manufacturing outdoor chairs, however. That work is still done on Pearl Street in Alton where Benz has both a manufacturing center and the warehouse for the furniture store in the old Bluff City Brewery.

"That's where we have the manufacturing of the outdoor garden furniture," he said. "We also manufacture residential greenhouses."

That garden furniture is sold across the country at various garden shows. Benz said their manufactured outdoor furniture makes its way to shows and state fairs "from Miami Beach to Boston, and everywhere in between." He said they have also hosted displays at the Minnesota and Iowa state fairs.

Next week, Benz will find himself at such a show in Indianapolis. While he is gone, the store will be ran by its usual director of operations, Barb Scannell. Scannell is a manager at the store, and Benz said she has been one of the biggest helps he has had in the 35 plus years she has worked for him.

Tony Fillop is Benz's on-the-road salesperson, he said.

"Tony is a key salesperson, who does a lot of traveling," he said. "Without him and , we would not have been able to keep going."

Benz said the majority of his staff has been with the business for more than a decade, and he added he is most grateful for all the customers he has had over the course of the last 40 years.

To celebrate four decades of a successful local business, Benz said New Frontiers will be hosting a huge sale with everything at least 20 percent off of normal prices.

