



PIONEER PRESS: JOHN DOMAN
Jeff Saarela can carry his workbench as if it were a suitcase.

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Volunteer Work Bench

A Fridley man has put together a portable workbench that has many uses. Now, he's got to zero in on his niche markets.

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The collapsible workbench can be put to use in an office, workshop, kitchen, hobby room or other workspaces. Saarela sits next to one in his wife's quilting room.

Owner: Jeffrey Saarela
Type of business: Manufacturer of portable workbenches
Number of employees: One
Location: Fridley
Contact information: 763-574-9929; VolunteerWorkBench.com
Tell us what your business does. It manufactures the Volunteer Work Bench, a wood bench with a unique design that makes the bench easy to put together, take apart, transport and store. The Volunteer Work Bench has a 36" stand which supports a 25" by 48" countertop and two movable shelves that can be adjusted to four different levels. The countertop and shelves are protected with trim for styling and rough handling. Weighing only 38 pounds, the Volunteer Work Bench is capable of supporting 1,500 pounds.

When taken apart for transport or storage, the top and shelves connect to make the bench look like a suitcase with a handle and a depth of only 2½". Its kitchen-counter working height is excellent for any standing task. Easy to move around when assembled, the bench "volunteers" for countless tasks.

Why are you launching it now? I have used the original stand for almost 20 years in my piano restoration workshop and have found it to be irreplaceable. Family and friends lent their suggestions for adding a top and making it portable, which makes it extremely useful. I am confident it will catch on once everyone sees how it can improve anything done around the house, at



Jeff Saarela picks up his collapsible workbench by its handle, demonstrating its portability.

work or on the road.

Where did you get the idea for your business? I volunteered at House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul. During a three-year period, I showed the Choir School children how to rebuild and refinish a grand piano. We needed a workbench to work on and a place to store piano parts. The original stand was made from discarded church pews and had a sheet of plywood for the top.

How did you develop your business plan? It's been trial and error. To market the product, I started with fairs and craft shows, along with creating a website. I've also approached several local manufacturers and big-box retailers and realized I wanted to see the bench manufactured locally. The Volunteer Work Bench is currently available at Siwek Lumber and Millwork in Minneapolis, Beisswenger's Hardware in New Brighton and Calla Lilly Quilt Shop in Blaine. A YouTube video for quilters is in the works and shows the bench being assembled; it should drive traffic to the website. Targeting trade shows for specific interest groups is a future plan.

How are you financing your business? Personal resources.

How do you see current economic conditioning affecting your business? Consumers are still cautious and demand above-average value for their money. It's a challenge to introduce something new in this type of environment. However, I've recently experienced a pick up in my business activity and am encouraged by the continued interest in the Volunteer Work Bench.

What makes your business unique? The Volunteer Work Bench appeals to both men and women for their regular chores and hobbies, in the home and at work, especially where space is at a premium. It fits in most vehicles for travel and is easy to store. The standard high-density-overlay countertop is exterior rated and resistant to chemical and heat abuse. Applications for use are virtually unlimited. For example, they're being used by quilters and crafters, in classrooms, garages and basement workshops and as additional counter space in

the kitchen or at the cabin. If the stand is glued together, it becomes practically indestructible.

What was the biggest obstacle you had to overcome to get this business going? Perfecting the design and learning where my markets exist. Each niche market, such as quilters or retail outlets, has individual styles and unique characteristics.

How did you overcome the obstacle? I've kept at it. Each part of the development has seen changes and improvements. It's easy to be excited when each customer

tells me what he or she has in mind for the workbench.

What will tell you the business is successful? My first goal is for the Volunteer Work Bench to be locally produced and well known. When it is recognized as a popular product, it will financially support music education for children, letting the product support its origins. I hope the bench gives like a volunteer.

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The workbench, shown at the height of the countertop, can add workspace in the kitchen.