

Beds turn into thriving business for Big Flats man

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Written by
G. Jeffrey Aaron

In August 2002, John Vence designed and made a wooden loft bed for his son's college room at Penn State's campus in Altoona.

The bed was made in Vence's garage on what he described as "hand-me-down" woodworking tools. He delivered it, set it up and drove back to his Big Flats home.

"A few days later, my son called me and asked if I could make a couple more beds because he'd sold two of them," Vence said. "People were seeing the one I'd made for him, and they wanted one, too."

Although Vence didn't realize it at the time, he was opening the door for what would eventually become College Bed Lofts, a [small business](#) specializing in custom-made loft beds.



John Vence, owner of College Bed Lofts

Three years after making and delivering that first bed, the company found itself at the top of Google's list of loft bed-making companies. As Vence's company rose through the Google listings, it caught the attention of Amazon, which approached Vence with an offer to sell his beds through the online vendor's website.



The finished product at College Bed Lofts in Elmira Heights. / JENNIFER KINGSLEY / STAFF PHOTO

Made in the Twin Tiers

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About the company

- Name: College Bed Lofts
- Address: 382 Upper Oakwood Ave., Elmira Heights
- Phone: (607) 739-2331
- Website: www.collegebedlofts.com
- Of note: Sales at College Bed Lofts are done exclusively [online](#).



A worker creates the pieces that will eventually be turned into a loft bed. / JENNIFER KINGSLEY / STAFF PHOTO



He turned that down, but Vence's beds have still enjoyed widespread popularity. They've been featured on the "Dr. Phil Show," "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," "Unforgettable" and "The Big C."

"Dr. Phil called us because people on his show re-did the apartment for a family he became involved with in New York City," Vence said. "The other shows found us on the [Internet](#)."

Vence made those first beds in his 20-foot-by-20-foot garage and, following his wife's suggestion, also decided to sell the plans for the beds.

After two intermediate moves — to the Holding Point in Horseheads and the Hungerford Building in Big Flats — the business now operates out of a 10,000-square-foot building on Upper Oakwood Avenue in Elmira Heights.

Vence used to buy the lumber for his beds from Lowe's home improvement store in Big Flats. His 20,000-pound lumber orders are now delivered to Albany by rail [car](#) and brought to Elmira Heights by a hired trucking company.

And where College Bed Lofts originally employed his four [family](#) members, it now employs 11 full-time workers and four part-timers.

The company has even outgrown its name. In its early days, the bulk of its business came from [college students](#) who wanted the loft beds for their dorm rooms. But now, about 75 percent of the bed orders come from parents looking to furnish their children's bedrooms.

Vence also has introduced a new product — a gameboard for cornhole, a beanbag toss game that's popular in the Midwest. The gameboard is sold over the Internet and is available at the Corning and Bath building company stores.

"Woodworking was just a [hobby](#) for me," Vence said. "I never thought it would turn into a business."

To get an idea of what College Bed Loft beds look like, picture a bunk bed set with the lower bed missing. The space where the missing bunk would have been is left open for any number of options — a desk, chair and bookshelves, a small bachelor refrigerator and microwave or a play area for youngsters. Each bed comes hand-sanded and ready to paint or stain.

Regardless of the size of loft bed ordered, each starts out the same — 2-by-4 or 2-by-6 pieces of "J" grade spruce cut from the center of the log and as knot-free as possible. Vence prefers to buy the lumber cut from trees from the Pacific Northwest, where the trees grow straighter and with fewer branches.



Orders are boxed for shipping at College Bed Lofts

The lumber is delivered in 16-foot lengths and cut to the appropriate size for the bed ordered. All of the Vence's beds are custom made and are available in twin, full and queen sizes.

During the ordering process, customers fill out an online height calculator that dictates the space above and below the bed. Based on the information, Vence's woodworkers cut the bed's legs, rungs, rails, mattress slats and safety rail boards to the correct length.

The pieces are shipped pre-drilled, and assembling them requires only a hammer, adjustable wrench and cordless drill. The beds are also shipped unfinished, which allows customers to paint or stain them to their own liking.

Customer will sometimes send pictures of their beds back to Vence or post them on Pinterest, a pinboard-style social photo sharing website.

"There are a lot of creative people out there," Vence said.

Vence, a former information technology consultant, credits Google for the rapid growth of College Bed Lofts.

The company started out with paid advertising on the Google site. But Vence later designed the business's website, including the tracking system on the back end that tells him the source of the site's visitors and how long they look at a particular page.

"The average time on our site is three minutes and 45 seconds, which means they're staying and reading the content," Vence said. "During the last three years, our number of visits have increased by 10 percent every month.

College Bed Lofts' website currently gets about 2,000 visitors daily, Vence said, which translates into 15 to 20 orders per day.

"That's a conversion rate of 1 percent, and I want to get it up to 1.5 percent, so we need to tell more people the beds are available and they will give them more space in their bedrooms," Vence said.

Vence also uses the website to help him determine where to spend his advertising dollars. And lately, he said, those dollars have been going to national magazines like Better Homes and Gardens, Real Simple, Family Fun and other publications aimed at homemakers with young children still in the house.

"People are becoming aware of what they can do with the beds," Vence said. "They're not just for college kids anymore."