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Making the bed: Manufacturer still thriving in Postville

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MATTHEW PUTNEY / Courier Photo Editor

Pat Malanaphy puts together a custom adjustable electric hospital bed at Transfer Master Products Inc. in Postville. Five years after the raid on Agriprocessors, the town is bouncing back.

Making the bed | Manufacturer still thriving in Postville

By JIM OFFNER

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POSTVILLE — Aaron Goldsmith has lived the Postville dream, even through its more nightmarish chapters.

The 56-year-old native of the Chicago area has owned Transfer Master Products Inc., a manufacturer of custom electric hospital beds, in Postville for 20 years.

Goldsmith, who earned a business degree at Drake University in Des Moines before following a spiritual call to rabbinical training in Israel and served as a rabbi for two years in Long Beach, Calif., found a way to put both backgrounds to good use in Postville, which had a strong Hasidic community and a ready-and-willing workforce.

Postville was ready-made for Goldsmith's vocation, he said.

"Actually, it's a benefit because I'm an Orthodox Jew and we have this built-in community of top-quality, hard-working people with a good work ethic," said Goldsmith, whose manufacturing operation employs eight workers and builds beds to an individual customer's specifications. "We've done very well having that kind of employee base to draw on, where integrity and

quality mean something."

Postville's central location doesn't hurt business, either, he said.

"We're in the center of the country, so logistics are easy," he said.

Transfer Master's business niche has attracted some high-profile contracts, Goldsmith said. One came from the late actor Christopher Reeve, of "Superman" fame, who was making his first public appearance — at the 1996 Academy Awards — after a horseback-riding accident the previous year had left him paralyzed.

Goldsmith said he set up a special room for Reeve at the Hyatt Regency Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles for the occasion.

"I'm the last stop for people who can't make it work with standard hospital beds," Goldsmith said, adding that he has handled projects for numerous Las Vegas hotels.

The company also has built numerous custom beds for returning military veterans who had suffered disabling injuries in the line of duty, Goldsmith said.

The factory Goldsmith has set up, on the edge of Postville, is quiet, compared to other manufacturing facilities. That's because much of the assembly work is done by individual specialists by hand.

Some "repetitive" tasks, such as welding and stamping, are outsourced, but the creative and manufacturing process is almost wholly done at the Postville factory, Goldsmith said.

"For woodwork, metalwork and quality craftsmanship we have plenty of people here to rely on," he said.

The company has four patents pending and already has about that many additional patents finalized, Goldsmith said.

"For a small company, that's pretty impressive," he said. "It's our own technology," he said.

Prices on the company's beds can range from \$3,500 to \$14,000, depending on the technology required.

There is no shortage of orders; the company was working on a new order from the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics in late April.

Functions vary by customer needs. In some cases, computer technology can aid a patient in shifting positions.

"We do a lot of work for children with congenital birth defects and special needs," Goldsmith said.

Goldsmith has submerged himself in the Postville community since his arrival. After the immigration raid

at the former Agriprocessors kosher meatpacking plant in town five years ago, Goldsmith collaborated with University of Northern Iowa professors Mark Grey and Michele Devlin on "Postville, U.S.A.: Surviving Diversity in Small-Town America," a book focused on the town's diverse population that, Goldsmith said, was designed to counter some negative publicity directed at the town in the raid's fallout.

"In the beginning, my position became something of an ambassador," he said. "My religious and secular background was a tremendous advantage."

Goldsmith also served on Postville's city council for a time, until "the politics became too much," he said.

But in that job, Goldsmith said, he was able to bring his varied expertise to bear.

"I was able to use all my background to build bridges and promote the positive qualities that continue to exist and thrive in Postville," he said.

Goldsmith said he still fills the ambassador's position, if unofficially. But now, he said, he's just a simple entrepreneur.

"We're kind of Iowa's secret special company," he said.