Enterprising People

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JIM VANGORDER: "I wasn't an established toymaker.... I made money, but I think we figured I was making one dollar an hour."

In Lieu of a Scholarship
Sales From Wooden Toys Putting Student Through College

One by one, he pulled them from a cardboard box.
A dinosaur, a snail, a kangaroo. Then a train, a bulldozer, an airplane.
"Oh, and you've got to see this," he said urgently, pulling odd-shaped wooden pieces from the box. He put them together quickly and held up what looked like a rather large alligator.
"Put that one on your shirt," he said, joking.

Jim VanGorder's toys are paying his way through Wake Forest University. The creations are putting his sister, Sally Ann, through college, too.
And, they are giving the VanGorder family a lot of satisfaction.

The VanGorders, who live in Jacksonville, make everything from elaborate trains to truck-shaped book holders to cat-shaped door stops. They make crayon battleships, rubberband guns, trucks with short beds, trucks with long beds. With few exceptions, the toys are all wood and stand on wheels.
"If it doesn't roll, we can't sell it," VanGorder said, spinning a pair of finely-sanded wheels in his hands.

The idea for the family enterprise came six years ago from VanGorder, then a high school senior, who said he had become tired of always working for someone else.
"I told my dad I would like to try to do something on my own," he said. "I asked him if he would let me."

VanGorder's father okayed the project, and the two agreed that - because VanGorder had a scholarship to attend Campbell University - any money he made could be spending money for school.
"Dad bought the equipment; I bought the wood," he said. "Originally I started off using scrap wood. Some contractor would be building a house or tearing down a roof and I'd get the scraps."
VanGorder didn't have toys in mind at first. He started out designing and making models for decoration - airplanes, shrimp boats and trucks. His ideas weren't exactly successful; nor were his methods of marketing his new products.
"I wasn't an established toymaker. You don't just go out and sell them. I didn't know how to deal with stores. I made money, but I think we figured I was making one dollar an hour."

VanGorder's aspirations took a more serious turn when he decided after his freshman year at Campbell to forfeit his scholarship and transfer to Wake Forest.
"I had to come up with some money. We set a goal for how much we needed to make before I came up here (to Wake). The deal was I had to work hard, but learn what it was to make a profit. It meant going to school or not in the fall."

Banking on his toys to pay the way, VanGorder worked hard that summer to turn his hobby into a moneymaker. But as the Aug. 15 deadline neared, he realized he wasn't going to reach his goal. He called Wake's admissions office and told the people there his dilemma. His acceptance would be valid through the spring semester, he was told.
"I had a really good Christmas," he said. "Compared to now, it was lousy, but then, it was the first time I could prove I could make a profit at it."

The VanGorders have been making a profit from their toymaking ever since. Last summer, VanGorder said that he, his two younger sisters and their parents decided to "really make a go of it."
They made a lot of contacts in the craft business and averaged attending at least one craft show a week. Since they could not meet postal deadline regulations for a mail-order business, they counted mostly on the business they got from shows. Now, they have a waiting list of interested customers and can't fill the orders fast enough.
While VanGorder used to do most of the designing and cutting himself, now all of the family members do everything.
When VanGorder was away part of last summer at school, Sally Ann, a student at Meredith College, designed a new line of animal toys.

"If any one of us were missing, we would be hurting," he said. "I think if we all specialized it wouldn't be as good."

Most of the toys are cut from white and yellow pine and spruce wood, sanded by machine and hand several times, and finished with non-toxic linseed oil. Most are one piece and they contain no metal or plastic parts. If a toy requires more than one piece, VanGorder uses a glue that he knows — from experience — works.

"We tested it by our own mistake. One time we accidentally glued two pieces of a block truck together backward. We tried pulling it apart and soaking it apart because we wanted to save the pieces. Finally, we had to saw the thing apart and when our saw went past the joint, it didn't go through it, it went around it."

"Nothing is indestructible, but I've had kids throw my stuff against a brick wall to see how long they last."

The finished product is one that VanGorder the salesman knows is a good one.

"They are old-fashioned wooden toys. They're not metal, they're not plastic. People really get tired of that. Kids do, too. They are simple so that kids can use their imagination. Their brains don't have to switch back into neutral. They can be creative."

At shows, the VanGorder's make sure their toys leave their table in plastic bags because they want people to see them. And they keep a sign on their table that says "please touch" because they want people to feel the toys, too.

As for the future, VanGorder, now a senior at Wake Forest, hopes to be accepted into Moody Bible Institute's flight school in Tennessee in 1986. He wants to be a mission pilot.

But until then, he says he will take a year after school to help his father, a U.S. Marine pilot who retires this summer, build up their toy business.

"It's still hard work ... but we can get excited about it because we know our potential. We've seen it happen. It's no longer a shot in the dark."

"I'm hoping to really get my dad pushed off and going for it. It's been a lot, a lot of hard work ... but God has really provided for us. And it's been through the toys."

This is another in a periodic series dealing with small business enterprises.