**Forsythe Entrepreneurial Center**

Founder Stories: Founder of Tech Tamer Woodworks

Presented by Paul Earle

Paul Earle: Hi, I'm Paul Earle, principal of Earl and Company and a faculty member at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. Welcome to season one of Founder Stories produced by the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The mission of Founder Stories is to provide you the listener with a deeper understanding of entrepreneurship, engage and entertain you along the way for sure and perhaps even inspire you to become an entrepreneur yourself. Many of you might be familiar with the notion of the quote unquote maker movement, a resurgence of craftsmanship that is taking smaller markets and making them big. Well, we have a great guest for this episode, a real true maker.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: I'm Mark Sky-Shrewsberry. I am the designer and craftsmen at tech Tamer, Woodworks, a solopreneurship business where I design and fabricate charging stations to help people get their mobile devices under control.

Paul Earle: Mark began his story with, well, the beginning of his story. As a visually impaired person, it's especially interesting.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: Well, I started Tech Tamer Woodworks about three or four years ago and it's been sort of the combination of a few streams that have run through my life. I grew up doing a lot of hands on carpentry and woodworking with my dad. He was a professional carpenter and had me. I followed him around my entire childhood acting as his helper, handing him and fetching him tools and supplies as he needed them. He taught me a little bit of the woodworking side of things, some hands on stuff, but I never really thought that it was going to be a career. I did the traditional college path, degree in history museum studies, and I assumed that I would be sort of a professional in the museum setting eventually. That was my initial career goal. After settling down in a fairly rural area with my wife, it became quite clear that I needed to find an alternative goal because the transportation here is such a problem for people with with visual problems. It's just an obvious barrier.

So I started looking for a a new avenue, and after spending 10 years fixing up our two family house, part of which we rent out, after spending 10 years working on that pretty consistently, I was very confident with my woodworking skills and abilities, and it finally occurred to me that an area that needs attention is helping people manage their mobile electronic devices. At the time, we had two kids in the house, and everyone had a phone, a cell phone, a tablet, and the amount of mess and clutter that the devices would generate was really impressive. It was taking over a table in the living room and it was just always just an eyesore.

Paul Earle: Mark talked about how he has evolved the business over time. In the military, they say that the battle plan goes out the window the second the first shot is fired. That's true in entrepreneurship as well.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: So I put it upon myself to develop some organizers, some charging stations to help keep this stuff under control. My first attempt was pretty ugly and pretty bulky, but I've gone through several design changes and modifications over the years and I've got a few good models now that can be modified to fit into just about anyone's decor so that they can get a piece that matches the way they want their house to look, from fun and funky to just plain and boring, and I also offer plenty of options for what their charging needs are. Be it just a a couple with two phones and maybe a tablet all the way to a family with a whole bunch of devices, four or five cell phones and four or five tablets.

Paul Earle: Like all great entrepreneurs, Mark's work is designed to solve real needs.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: When I started doing this, it was kind of with the idea of just getting the visual clutter under control, but I've come to realize that an important piece of this is helping families manage the technology that sort of crept into our lives. Four or five years ago, you would not have guessed the level of integration that the devices have reached in our lives. So much so that it's sort of becoming problematic. But my charging stations offer a way for a family to get all this stuff together, have it in one place in their house. That way you can say it's all tucked away. You can even guarantee that your kids put their things away at night and that they'll be charged and ready to go and that you'll know where they are the next day, and you'll know that that they aren't up getting into who knows what kind of virtual trouble online all night long.

I've come to realize that my mission is incorporating both the physical management and integration of this stuff and it has a major element of intellectual control or family management that can let you get a handle on your devices. And that's kind of the point. I'm trying to get to where I'm emphasizing that in my marketing.

Paul Earle: His offering? Not just one product line, but two.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: I have two or three product lines, pieces I call tech beds and pieces I call tablet hoards and pieces I call family charging stations, but they all have certain characteristics. They're all wooden bodied units, so it looks like a traditional piece of craftsmanship made out of hardwoods, maple, oak or cherry and sometimes walnut, which I can finish in any number of ways.

So they all have sort of a traditional craftsmen sort of appearance. Wooden piece of furniture or accessory that you might have in your house, but they also have a hidden side and at the bottom, somewhere in the bottom or the back, there's a USB charger and/or a four prong power outlet that's hidden away. It's integral in the piece, but it's not something you see when you look at the piece all the time. It's tucked away on the bottom or in the back. And then you can plug in your devices and route the cords that came with your through some builtin channels and pathways that are built into the charging station and hook your devices up so that all the cords are sort of tucked away and hidden away along with the charger on the bottoms and backs and small cords are sticking out for you to access.

Paul Earle: Like the craftsman he is, he geeked out a bit about how his product is actually made and what it does. And by the way, I use the term, quote unquote, geek out in the most flattering possible context.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: Most of my pieces are designed with a family or a home in mind, but I've also sold pieces to businesses where a lot of businesses now charge multiple iPads or tablets. And I've also made units that are specifically about charging cell phones with the idea that if you were having a meeting and/or a big family gathering, everyone's going to come with a cell phone, everyone's going to want to charge it, but the meeting might go better if those phones were put away someplace else. This new set of charters, which I'm calling gatherings, are geared more towards charging lots of phones in one place in a way that would let you sort of check them in as you come into a room or into a dinner, and that way everyone knows that their phone will be ready for them when they're done, yet they won't be interrupting your meeting, or your supper, or whenever you've got planned for the day.

Paul Earle: I asked Mark when he knew he was onto something. It's an exciting aha moment that was a life changer.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: Well, I guess the point where I decided that this was really a useful approach that was going to have some traction and that could have some promise in it was a year after I'd set up my Etsy shop. Things started off incredibly slowly, but then picked up nicely after about six months. I was doing really well with it. I have found that if I make up a new design it will eventually sell. And Etsy is a really nice way to test out designs. You can put one up there and after time you'll know if it's going to be a winner or not.

Paul Earle: Another strong marker of a great entrepreneur is the affinity for testing things. There's no grand strategic plan and no big reveal. Developing and advancing products is a game of trial, error, trial, error. Constant iteration.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: I was using Etsy as a way to test designs, because you could put a piece up there and get an idea of how much traction it was going to have within within six months or a year. And I found that a couple of my designs were losers, and I've come to accept that perfectly well and I don't make those anymore, but I've found that two or three of my designs were really pretty well thought out. I've had regular sales on them. I've had times when I've had more orders than I could really fill, but another reason I know this is a viable way to go is that since I've started making these, other people have started making similar things. There are a number of groups and individuals making attractive charging stations for the home and office. It's something that seems obvious now, but when I started doing this, I don't think anyone was really thinking it was an area that that had a market. And it really does have a market. Everyone may not really know they need one of these, but quite honestly they kind of do.

Paul Earle: Mark talked a lot about the unique challenges of implementing his craft with visual impairment.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: When I started going to the Hadley program, I went at it knowing that I wanted to know something about running a business and entrepreneurship, but quite frankly I didn't know the depth of what I didn't know, and once I became exposed to the Hadley curriculum, I could see the complexity of the task I was undertaking and realize that there were going to be a lot of challenges in it for someone with partial sight, no sight, or perfect sight, it know being an entrepreneur is not a simple easy thing. Not being able to drive is certainly an extra level of complexity in the world we live in. We live in a world built around cars and convenience for people in automobiles and if you fall outside of that realm, it comes with added problems. To some extent, that was why I picked the approach of having basically a web based business where my market is really the continental United States as opposed to a small local market that lets me do my production within my house, because the machinery I need to do it with isn't isn't huge.

I don't need to store or deliver kitchen cabinets. I'm interested in doing small pieces that can be shipped and marketed online. Going through the Hadley program really did help me focus in on that in a way, because up until then I probably did have ... I had dreams of doing kitchens and things along those lines. By the time I was done with the Hadley program, I'd realized that that just wasn't going to be a viable approach unless I went straight into hiring people, and making that leap is ... That's a big leap to make in the beginning.

Paul Earle: Mark's business is really interesting because it's simultaneously really old. Jesus was a carpenter, right? And really modern. Namely, his goods are sold online and e-commerce has opened up a whole new world of opportunities for him.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: Online I can, in theory, attract customers across the country. I haven't kept track, but I wouldn't be surprised if I've sent a charging station to every state in the country at this point. Including Alaska and Hawaii, which I had to cut out unfortunately, because the shipping was just awful.

Paul Earle: I love that. Mark went on to offer advice to those considering the entrepreneurial journey themselves.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: My basic advice to someone would be take a look at your mission. You need to have that carefully defined and thought out before you ... Even in the early stages. You need be working on your mission and refining it and getting as focused as you can. Hadley put a real emphasis on on planning and showed some of the tools that you could use to effectively plan out a business. And another key factor Haley pointed out was the idea of looking for help in various areas, areas where you lack either the expertise or the time. That was something I hadn't truly appreciated before starting the Hadley program. And finally, I guess the last thing would be re-evaluating. It's also important to re-evaluate things as things go along. Take a look back at your mission and see how that needs to be refined and tweaked and how that is reflected in your planning and the areas where you need help.

I really did find the Hadley program very helpful in helping me with the planning side of things and really clarifying what I needed to be thinking about, when I needed to be thinking about it, and just seeing that, no matter what your visual capacity, you are going to need help to be an entrepreneur. No successful entrepreneur works independently. Everyone has help in one form or another. Be that a family member to help you take packages to UPS or hiring a CPA to help work out your books, because a lot of people with creative entrepreneurial ideas, really ... I find a lot of us are lacking in the bookkeeping side of entrepreneurship. I know it's important and I can work ... I can follow a system once it's set out for me, but setting up the system would just be too much.

Paul Earle: Mark talked a lot about what it's like to ride the rapids of entrepreneurship.

Mark Sky-Shrewsberry: Being an entrepreneur is is both exciting and overwhelming. The exciting part is that you get to decide what you're doing and how you're doing it to some extent. While you're reevaluating your mission, you can decide if you want to shift it a little or respond to the market in a more effective way. And you're the one who's really in charge of setting the vision. That's the part I find most satisfying is that, certainly for a solo entrepreneurship like mine, I really am the one in charge of deciding what's important and where things are going to go, and I get to reap the rewards or the consequences of those decisions and that's kind of the scary part is that I make mistakes sometimes, you never know how things are going to work out. There is a roll of the dice element in being an entrepreneur, a certain amount of risk that you have to be willing to take on and be able to adapt to.

The amount of time that being an entrepreneur takes is kind of crushing. That's the most negative piece of it. There's just an endless list of things to do and redo and think about and that's exciting and exhilarating in a way. And it would also be nice to just be able to sit down one evening and not have a to do list kind of clicking through my brain. I have worked outside of the house for other people, and it's not the same when it's not your business. It doesn't occupy your mind and your time in a way that being an entrepreneur does. You have to go all in to be an entrepreneur.

Paul Earle: And there you have it. Craftsmanship, e-commerce, the old and the new, a real sense of mission, capital M. I've enjoyed this tale and I hope you have too. Here's to the future.