

Entrepreneur grabs hold of opportunity

Product seeks to make gripping iPad more comfortable

By Jenny Munro

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David Williams' big idea — the one that launched Comfe Designs — came as he was uncomfortably holding a book and trying to read it.

So he thought why not make the experience as enjoyable as possible, using the electronic equipment most people his age use to read. He went with the iPad because that was the device he was using the most.

Besides, "it's cool," he said, and has inundated the lives of many Americans.

That was the genesis of Comfe Hands, two soft PVC corner holders that give a tablet a shape that fits the hand's natural contours with a soft, gripping feel. It can even make the iPad feel lighter.

And that's the kind of business Greenville and the Upstate need, said John Moore, Greenville Chamber executive vice president. It's not just a small business, he said. Comfe Designs is a high-impact entrepreneurial enterprise — a company that markets its innovations outside the Southeast and one that could grow quickly, adding employees.

The region needs a lot of these startups, he said, because "the odds are always against entrepreneurs" since their goal is to disrupt existing markets, making a place for their product.

"It's key to create a lot of them," he said, adding that these businesses help diversify Greenville's economy. "We need to layer locally owned high-impact companies with larger companies attracted to the region."

In addition to the diversification this contributes, it also enhances innovation and encourages others to go out on their own with their big idea, he said.

Williams said the idea he was after came quickly, but it took a little longer to refine it.

"That weekend I designed my first prototype.

It was scissored out of cardboard," he said.

The young entrepreneur, now 29, came up with the idea in November of 2010. He officially launched sales of his product last

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David Williams has designed “Comfe Hands,” two holders meant to make gripping an Apple iPad more comfortable. PATRICK COLLARD/STAFF

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month. Between then and now, he has an investment of about \$100,000 in his money, investor funding and time.

After spending his early life in Columbus, Ohio, Williams moved to Greenville with his family. He earned an English degree at Bob Jones University and began working with a military contractor on war games. He then decided to get his master’s degree in professional communications at Clemson University, adding some computer science courses to the mix. Once he graduated, he became a web designer but was laid off in 2009 when the economy was tanking.

“It was the best thing that ever happened to me,” he said. He spent a couple of months in Hawaii, pursuing writing and photography. His next move, he decided, would be to gain a doctorate in computer science, also from Clemson.

But “it was a complete waste of my time,” he said, adding the problem was not the courses or the teachers. He didn’t have a lot of computer science background and the program just wasn’t what he wanted.

“I always wanted to be an entrepreneur, to create things,” he said. He told himself, “I can’t compete with these people, but I can hire them.”

So he found the Gnosso website and applied for a job. He began working with the company, located in the NEXT Innovation Center, helping customers integrate software with their processes. He had his brainstorm while working at Gnosso.

"I designed the product over a weekend," he said. He brought the idea to Peter Waldschmidt, Gnosso's chief executive. He then researched the idea with iPad users, who all seemed to love it.

"I'd challenge him to test the idea, finding the cheapest and easiest way," Waldschmidt said.

Williams said he made 3-D prototypes of the device about 20 or so times to get it right.

"I would work my 40 hours at Gnosso and then I'd work 20 or so hours" on Comfe Hands, he said. Besides refining the product, he conducted research with potential users and experts in ergonomics.

Eventually, the company, which is a member of the NEXT network, received investment funding from Waldschmidt and Martha Long, a CPA. Williams said he also put between \$5,000 and \$6,000 of his own money in the pot.

Waldschmidt said he decided to invest in the company for a couple of reasons.

"A lot of it has to do with the person. It's not enough to have a good idea," he said. Williams "wouldn't take no for an answer."

But, Waldschmidt said, "It's a great idea, too." Williams stayed with Gnosso for about 18 months, leaving last June to work full time with Comfe Hands. He initially worked out of the NEXT Innovation Center but now doesn't have an office because it's not needed. When he made the decision to create a company and really push the product, he thought of it two ways.

"No one praises people for doing what they're supposed to do. They praise them for doing something that's not part of their job and doing it successfully," he said. And if he failed, so what. He said he knew he would have a place to stay and food to eat. Failure is not a disaster in the United States.

"And maybe this chance would only come once in a lifetime," he said.

The product is produced by a manufacturing company in Colorado. And that's important to Williams.

"Everything — the product, the box — has been developed and produced in the United States," he said. "People in America have wonderful skills and want to work."

Comfe Hands retails for \$49.95. It is available on Amazon and at a few retail outlets, and more will be added. "When we first released this, it was so exciting. People just get this big grin" when they hold it, Williams said. Williams said he knows he needs more designs, and more are in the works. Some are a spinoff of the Comfe Hands design, including new colors and several ideas suggested by users. In addition, he's working on designs for experiences with smartphones, work stations, sound systems, television monitors and other consumer electronics.

The goal is to design with ergonomics, fashion and unique utility in mind, he said. "Every new device introduced has its own set of problems," he said. "We find a problem. Then we make a product that eliminates the problem and improves the experience."

Greenville is a good area to begin a new business, Williams said. Many people who have created products, processes and businesses are here and willing to help new businesses get off the ground. The NEXT Innovation Center is a major resource because the businesses there want to promote new ideas. Moore said the Upstate community is working through NEXT to provide the resources needed by new startup companies like Comfe Designs. NEXT is an economic development program of the Greenville Chamber that supports the growth and attraction of "globally impactful, highgrowth companies throughout the Greenville/ Upstate area." It provides direct services, advocacy, infrastructure development and relocation assistance.

"We're getting there," he said. "We want to be one of the best in the world at supporting entrepreneurship." By learning from the successes and failures of other ventures similar to NEXT, the community is becoming more nimble in finding the resources necessary for these companies to thrive, he said. Currently, more than 80 companies are part of the NEXT

network while about 25 are located in the innovation center.

Williams said he expects growth at Comfe Designs to be substantial over the next year, primarily with the addition of more designers. "There are a lot of people who have an idea, who want to do something creative," he said. "You need an influx of new ideas."

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