

STRATEGIES

Ideas for growing business

Rocking the family business

ANNA BRUMBY SEES NEW GROWTH FOR MARIETTA-BASED BRUMBY CHAIR CO.

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Contrary to the popular adage, you sometimes can go home again.

For **Anna Brumby**, CEO of the Marietta-based rocking chair company, **The Brumby Chair Co.**, that has borne her family name for four generations, coming back to her roots meant the chance to take over the reins of a business built on tradition but operating in the contemporary marketplace.

"I'd lived away for a long time and worked for other companies in London, New York and Atlanta, but it was always in the back of my head that it would be fun to come back and take over the business," said Brumby, who lives in Buckhead. "When my father passed away in 2012, I sat down with our accountants and went over the financials, did research and spent time with the caners to see where the business was. I didn't want to jump in without doing my homework; I wanted to make sure there was a viable business."

"We have chairs that are more than 100 years old. That's part of our legacy, too."

ANNA BRUMBY,
The Brumby Chair Co.

During the economic downturn, many furniture companies went under or were acquired. The Brumby Chair Co. managed to eke by under the direction of Brumby's father, Otis. He followed in the footsteps of his ancestors who launched the firm in 1875 as an off-shoot of a barrel-making business.

"My great-grandfather, James, knew how to bend the wood for a barrel, but flour was moving into burlap sacks," said Brumby. "So he turned out rocking chairs and then got his brother, Thomas, to come work for him. In 1888, they incorporated as the Brumby Chair Co., and my great-grandfather continued working until 1945, producing 250 types of chairs."

The company's signature item was, and still is, the "jumbo rocker," a roomy, relaxing furniture piece with

a hand-woven cane seat and back. As World War II rolled on, many of the workers skilled in producing that chair went to work for the war effort at Marietta's Bell Bomber plant. The business was dormant until a Kennesaw couple revived it in 1970 and licensed the Brumby name. But Otis

Brumby bought it back and relaunched it as a family-owned entity in 1992, just as his daughter was heading to high school.

"I remember helping him do research on the family for press packets," she said. "I worked in the shop after school, and my mother and I cleaned it on Sundays.

When I came home from college, I delivered chairs. It was a big part of my childhood."

In 2012, Brumby's sister, who had served as general manager for 15 years,

Anna Brumby is the fourth generation of her family to run The Brumby Chair Co., which sells rockers. She took over the company in 2012 and expects to expand its product line in 2017.



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turned over control.

"What really convinced me to take it on was hearing story after story from customers," Brumby recalled. "They'd tell me, 'I nursed my child,' or 'I rocked him to sleep in a Brumby.' Or, 'My daughter is having a baby, and I want her to have one.' People fought with their siblings over who got the rockers on their grandparents' porches. Our products still meant a great deal to our customers. It made me realize we still had a strong brand product with opportunities to grow."

But the company hasn't grown by offering more products. The \$995 jumbo leads a short list that includes a baby rocker, double or "courting" rocker and a footstool. The process isn't rushed; each piece is hand-turned by artisans in Tennessee and shipped to Marietta, where a local crew handles assembly, sanding, painting, staining and shipping. But Brumby was able to improve the bottom line by cutting costs, revamping marketing and increasing sales efforts with an online presence.

"These rockers are extremely hard to make, and after 2012, we were hit pretty hard," she said. "When I came in, a lot of vendor renegotiation was needed. The price for shipping, for example, was three times what it is today because the boxes we used were from an old design. A redesign cut costs by 20 percent. We stopped



PHOTOS/JOANN VITELLI

Billy Mealor helps finish Brumby rockers at the company's site in Marietta.

using a middle man and began using cane suppliers directly through an importer. We discontinued the lady rocker when we found that most people, if they sit in a lady and then a jumbo, want the bigger model. I also redesigned our website and collateral materials and launched a blog. Nothing was digitized; there was no social media account. We started online sales and selling to high-end hospitality firms like the Ritz, Four Seasons and boutique

hotels that offer the best products. That's been a great growth area."

Brumby's expectation for this year was 25 percent growth. "But we're trending at 40 percent over last year," she said. "We're not back from revenue or sales from 2008, but by end of this year, we should be."

That's an amazing comeback, says **Jay Dee Hanna** of **Sparta Woodworks** in Tennessee. His firm has worked with the Brumby company for more than 15

years, turning out the wood pieces that are shipped to the Marietta Square site for assembly.

"Over the past few years, she has built the business, even ordering two to three times the volume of parts," he said. "That's fantastic, considering that our industry has been hit extremely hard."

Devin McGinley, an analyst with **IBIS-World** in New York, said the fine furniture market, severely impacted by the economic downturn, is slowly starting to recover. "Domestic furniture sales have risen only modestly in the past five years," he said. "A strong housing recovery deserves much of the credit, but the continued entry of small-scale producers in recent years indicates that consumers have also returned to quality."

It's that quality that sets the products apart, said Brumby, who is now considering expanding the product line and offering more custom options in 2017.

"I'll see what resonates with customers," she said. "We don't want to overextend. We know we're a niche furniture market, and there aren't many others left in it. But that's what helps make us successful."

It also helps to have a long tradition to lean on, she added. "We have chairs that are more than 100 years old. That's part of our legacy, too – offering solid oak, sturdy chairs. It's why the one President Carter put on the White House balcony is still there today."