

Broken beanbag sparks venture

“Foof”—it’s not exactly a word that fits into a typical vocabulary.

But for Matt Jung '97 and Daniel “Chip” George '97, “Foof” is on the lips of everyone at their Grand Rapids furniture company, Comfort Research. That’s because sales of their signature piece, the Foof Chair, have propelled Comfort Research to success in recent years, and there are no signs that this growth will slow anytime soon.

Jung and George’s Foof Chair is an updated version of the beanbag chairs made popular in the 1960s, only with a twist. While the men were still juniors at Hope, they had an old beanbag chair that kept leaking pellets. Instead of throwing it away, they looked for a way to repair it.

“We decided to rip up some old couch cushions and fill the bag with that instead,” George said. “People liked it, and we thought, ‘Hey, we should try to make these.’”

That’s exactly what they did. Today, all of Comfort Research’s Foof products are filled with urethane foam, a material much more comfortable and durable than the pellets used in old-style beanbags. A quick glance through the company’s catalog reveals that almost any color, shape, and size of Foof product is available—including fruit-shaped chairs, pet beds, club chairs, ottomans, and pillows.

In the classroom, George and Jung felt challenged to work hard and aim for excellence. They both enjoyed the small class sizes and the interest that their professors and advisors showed in their personal and academic growth.

“Every time we go to a trade show, we’re one of the more unique companies there,” said George, who travels to eight or more shows each year to market their products. “Even if we don’t have a place in their stores, [retailers] at least stop by and try out our products and say, ‘Wow! This is so comfortable; I can’t believe it!’ We get that kind of reaction a lot.”

But many retailers have found a place in their stores for Comfort Research’s products. Currently, the company sells wholesale to more than 300 retailers around the country, including department store giants like JCPenney, Kohl’s, and Sears. They also sell to smaller, specialty stores, as well as to catalogs and websites.

Sales of Comfort Research products have grown by leaps and bounds with each passing year, and this accomplishment is not going unnoticed. George and Jung were among 11 entrepreneurs recognized during the 2004 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the

Year Awards for the West Michigan area. Additionally, Comfort Research has been featured in magazines such as *Business Week* and *Entrepreneur*.

This story of success is due, no doubt, to the hard work and determination of George and Jung, who are now both 30 years old. But they’ll say there were many other factors that played a part in their story, especially when they think back to the beginning of their business venture, and even earlier.

“I planned on owning my own business since I was 12,” said Jung, who earned a double major in accounting and business administration at Hope. “Everyone in my family has been in their own businesses at some point in their lives, and I just couldn’t imagine doing it any other way.”

George, who studied geology and business administration, was also open to the idea. His father, a business owner, had always told his son that there were many good reasons to start a company.

So after the friends revived their old beanbag chair in their junior year, they decided to pursue the possibility of turning their idea into a full-fledged business. At first, the young entrepreneurs tried to sew the chair covers themselves, visiting fabric stores to buy fabric remnants, zippers, and Velcro. They also enlisted the help of George’s mom, Mary Piers '68 George of Holland.

“It took two hours for me to sew one cover, and I know how to sew,” she recalled. “And I said, ‘Guys, this is not a job you can do yourselves.’”

The two students agreed, and decided to contract their sewing to a local company that could make the covers for much less than anticipated. They started buying fabric remnants from local furniture manufacturers Herman Miller and Haworth, and to speed up production of the chairs, they purchased a 16-horsepower chipper to shred the foam.

By the time their senior year began, George and Jung were selling their chairs at schools like Michigan State, Purdue, Northwestern, and, of course, Hope College. At Christmas, they opened a temporary retail store in Holland’s outlet mall and nearly sold out of their products. Through those early days, their college friends, professors, and parents were a great source of encouragement.

“People were a sounding board for us, asking us, ‘Have you thought about this, or have you thought about that?’” recalled George. “If it weren’t for Hope College, there are some people that wouldn’t have taken an interest in us and what we were doing.”

In the classroom, George and Jung felt challenged to work hard and aim for excellence. They both enjoyed the small class sizes and the interest that their professors and advisors showed in their personal and academic growth. One such professor was William Japinga, who taught business and marketing classes at Hope for 22 years before retiring in 2001.

“They were young, and they wanted to do something themselves,” Japinga said of



An idea born of an old bean bag chair in need of a refill during their Hope days has led to a full-time business with sales nationwide for Matt Jung '97 and Chip George '97. Appropriately, their “Foof” chairs can even be found on campus, most prominently on the second floor of the Martha Miller Center’s rotunda.

George and Jung’s venture. “You have to give them credit for having the fortitude to do that, rather than taking the so-called normal way of going to work for someone else.”

Friends of George and Jung also played a major role in the business start-up, from chipping foam to selling the Foof chairs at colleges and universities during the busy times at the beginning of the school year.

“I remember when we got our first big order from Meijer,” said George. “We gathered six or seven friends and all worked together for 27 hours straight to chip the foam and fill the bags.”

For her part, Mary George wasn’t sure at the time how far the business endeavor would take her son and Jung. But she did know that Hope College was a good place for their entrepreneurial spirit to take root.

“Nobody laughed at the idea,” she said of the Foof chair. “Being at a liberal arts college, they weren’t locked into one thing. I think at a small liberal arts college like Hope, there’s more interest in individual people and individual projects.”

Today, nearly 10 years after reworking that first old beanbag chair, George and Jung are excited about what’s ahead for Comfort Research. One year ago, they moved their business into a 55,000-square-foot facility in Grand Rapids, which houses their offices and a large manufacturing

area. Comfort Research now employs 30 people full time, and up to 50 more short-term workers leading up to the Christmas season. The business has showrooms in Las Vegas, Nev., and High Point, N.C., and may open a distribution center on the West Coast to better serve their clients on that side of the country.

Jung, who heads finance and operations, said his favorite part of the business is the continual growth and change. For instance, Comfort Research recently started manufacturing products for several stores, and is also looking into buying other companies.

“What we were doing two years ago is not what we’re doing today—from a production standpoint, from a product standpoint, to the way that we’re looking to grow our business,” Jung said.

Both men agree that the biggest challenge in their business is to constantly respond to the needs and desires of people who buy their products.

“You have to stay ahead of the game or someone will take your place,” said George. “You’re allowed a couple of ‘losers’ as long as they’re with a lot of ‘winners.’”

Hope College students, faculty, staff, and visitors can test out Comfort Research’s products by visiting the second floor rotunda in the new Martha Miller Center for Global Communication, where several large Foof chairs are part of the décor. ✎