

Lifeguard chairs prove to be lifesaver for local builder

Line of beachy products a hit with community

Michele Gillis

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When breast cancer survivor Shelly Cangemi sits in her custom-made breast cancer awareness lifeguard chair, she is reminded of her good fortune. "My husband bought the chair for me for Christmas as a surprise," said Cangemi, who lives on the Southside area and works in Ponte Vedra Beach.

Cangemi points out that the height of a lifeguard chair allows those on watch to have a clear and complete view.

"The lifeguard chair reminds me every day to look at the big picture and not overlook any small details or precious moments because at a moment's notice everything can be swept away like a wave crashing over all in its path," she said.

Alan Dunavant, owner of Dunavant Decor and Dunavant Home Services, can relate to Cangemi's viewpoint.

When Jacksonville's housing market crashed, it left a lot of casualties in its wake. Dunavant, a lifelong resident of Jacksonville Beach, was one of those people. His thriving home-improvement business dried up with the market as homeowners diverted funds away from renovations.

Dunavant was forced to get creative.

One day in 2011, while looking at old photos of himself taken while he worked as a lifeguard, a neighbor made a request that changed Dunavant's life.

John "Wimpy" Sutton, former Jacksonville Beach lifeguard and swim coach at Fletcher High School, asked Dunavant to build him a lifeguard chair for his yard.

"Alan is so talented," said Sutton. "My small red lifeguard chair was the first one he built and it was really cool. My parents were lifeguards as was my brother, so it has special meaning to me. Building that lifeguard chair also helped him figure out that he could make money doing it."

After Dunavant built Sutton's chair, he found his passion for building had been reignited.

"It felt good to build again," said Dunavant.

People drove by Sutton's home, saw the chair and the orders started coming in. Dunavant started Dunavant Decor in 2012 and started making lifeguard chairs in all shapes, sizes and colors for anyone who asked.

And ask they did.

The lifeguard chairs are made of pressure-treated pine and painted with high-gloss latex. He paints each one by hand and most chairs receive two coats of primer and three coats of paint to withstand the salt air at the beach.

To date, he has made and sold more than 100 lifeguard chairs, each ranging in price from \$250 to \$550 depending on the shape and size.

Dunavant's lifeguard chairs and surfboard benches can be seen all around the Beaches in front of many businesses including In the Pink, Lynch's Irish Pub, Lillies Coffee Bar, TacoLu, Angie's Subs, The Pier Restaurant and Two Dudes Seafood Restaurant as well as in front of many homes and pools.

He's also created mailboxes, picnic tables, custom signs, surfboard coffee tables, decorative shutters and more.

Surfboard benches range from \$650 to \$850. His latest creation, a picnic table with a beverage cooler in the center, starts at \$350.

He also started making lifeguard chairs that raise awareness in the community about certain issues. He created a pink and white chair that featured a breast cancer logo cutout and donated it to In the Pink, a boutique that raises money for breast cancer charities. He has also created chairs to honor Fletcher High School and another to honor his friend Andy Altee, a retired lifeguard, who was sick recently. He takes the lifeguard chairs to local events to allow people to take photos in them and to promote his work.

Many nonprofit organizations took note of how popular the lifeguard chairs and other items were and asked Dunavant to make them for their fundraisers.

He donated lifeguard chairs and other items to the Muscular Dystrophy Association, Jacksonville Diabetes Research Foundation, The Tom Coughlin Jay Fund, WaveMasters, Sisters of the Sea and St. Paul's church.

Dunavant, a Fletcher graduate, learned the art of building homes while working at Arvida in Sawgrass. After he got a feel for the building industry, he went into business for himself as Dunavant Home Services doing painting, woodworking, repairs, car restorations, and yard work - constantly learning as he went.

"My dad also did a lot of remodeling on houses, so I grew up watching and learning from him," said Dunavant.

Dunavant says he has always been creative and really enjoys making his work unique. He also likes setting his own hours and having his own business allows him the freedom to do that.

With the market improving, he is again very much in demand for home improvement.

"Most of my business is in exterior and interior painting and the rest are repairs, woodworking, trim work and remodeling," he said. "I like specialty work. I like turnkey jobs where I can hang a door, put the trim up and then turn around and paint it. They only have to call one person to do it all, except for electrical and plumbing."

For his current line of work, his Facebook page is packed full of requests for a specific size or shape of his chairs or artwork. Since he is making everything from scratch, he can make the chairs as tall, short or wide as someone requests.

For more on Dunavant Decor, visit his Facebook page at www.facebook.com/DunavantDecor.