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Christopher J. Smiley DDS

Michigan Dental Association, csmiley@michigandental.org

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COVID-19 Heroes: From Skis to Face Shields

By Christopher Smiley, DDS

How a Boyne City manufacturer of skis transformed itself during the COVID-19 lockdown, producing thousands of face shields used by health care workers in Michigan and beyond in the darkest days of the pandemic.



Jeff Thompson, partner and engineer with Shaggy's Copper Country Skis, displays the PPE shield kits and replacement lenses they continue to offer through their website.

When COVID-19 shut down businesses across the state, a few of these businesses were able to repurpose their operations to serve the community's needs. These COVID-19 heroes include craft breweries and distillers who produced hand sanitizer, a product in high demand and short supply. Front-line health care workers were finding it hard to obtain necessary supplies from the usual sources. Turning potable alcohol into hand sanitizer was a logical move to keep a business open by becoming an essential part of the supply chain needed to fight the spread of the pandemic.

A more creative effort to answer the call is the story of Boyne City, Michigan's Shaggy's Skis, who applied their unique skills and equipment intended for fabricating custom snow skis to instead provide essential PPE for health care workers.

COVID-19 hit at the tail end of Michigan's ski season, and the folks at Shaggy's were selling off their remaining stock, hosting a final demo-day event in March at Boyne. There were reports of people contracting COVID-19 in other states, and then the first person in the county tested positive for the virus. Jeff Thompson, president and co-founder of Shaggy's Copper Country Skis, found himself in a position familiar to many business owners in Michigan. Ski manufacturing is a "non-essential" business — thus, public health measures isolated all nine of his employees, including his wife and parents, at home, and his business operations ground to a halt.

(Continued on Page 50)



Shaggy's Zach Hardy crafts the core for a pair of custom skis.



COVID-19 Heroes (Continued from Page 49)

Listing the things they do in ski manufacturing, a post on the Shaggy's Facebook page asked the community, "What can we do to aid with pandemic efforts?"

Not all was dark in the world. At the same time, Jeff and his wife Stephanie found themselves in the maternity room celebrating the birth of their daughter when his mother, Shari, Shaggy's Skis office manager, called to say that the Facebook posting was noticed. McLaren Hospital reached out, asking if Shaggy's could manufacture protective face shields. Hurriedly, Jeff responded that he didn't know much about the shields but would like to give it a go if he could see a prototype. Within hours, the VP of McLaren Northern Michigan Hospital came into the maternity room with samples!

These samples were single-use, disposable shields with foam and elastic headband riveted to the shield. Jeff immediately made calls to source supplies. A vendor Shaggy's used in ski manufacturing had an ample supply of suitable fog-resistant plastic. Together with Outline Industries, a company owned by Jeff's brother Jonathon, Shaggy's produced more than 150,000 disposable shields for McLaren Health System hospitals across the state. Shaggy's kept their team working during the shutdown. In fact, additional workers were needed to assemble, pack, and ship more than 7,000 shield kits daily.

Production overruns allowed Shaggy's to regularly offer five to 25 kits through their social media page, honoring requests from first responders in the Upper Peninsula, as well as orders from the East Coast, to California — along with inquiries from Europe! A friend of Thompson's brother, a dentist, reached out about making shields that could accommodate opti-



At a dentist's suggestion, Shaggy's modified shield design to accommodate loops with light. (Photo credit: Caroline Okonkowski, DMD.)

cal loops and light. A.L.P., a lighting manufacturer in Charlevoix, was identified to produce injection-molded frames, allowing transition to a visor style frame with foam padding and adjustable straps. Through trial and error, they modified their design to build a model to address the dentist's needs. Word spread, and the dental niche market generated additional internet orders. The goal was to have face shield kits out the door as fast as possible — get them made, cleaned, packed for shipment, and picked up by UPS at 4:30 p.m. the same day.

The Thompson family has a history of repurposing operations. The company's namesake, great-great uncle "Shaggy" Lehto, was a blacksmith in the UP town of Kearsarge. In 1908 he used his tools and skills to fashion skis for family and friends to better-navigate through the more than 300 inches of annual snowfall in the Keweenaw Peninsula.

Manufacturing creativity comes

Editor Chris Smiley's custom Shaggy's skis topped with graphics from the cover of the April 2021 *Journal of the Michigan Dental*.

naturally to Jeff, who holds a degree in mechanical engineering from Michigan Tech. “My brother Jonathon and I were competitive skiers through high school in South Lyon.” Jeff says. “One day, I found a ski and thought it would be fun to affix the tip to the front end of a bicycle to make a snow bike. When we cut the ski apart, we discovered it consisted of wood, fiberglass, and plastic, and immediately realized we could make these.” A modern-day vision for Shaggy’s Skis was born. Jeff’s father, a home builder with a well-equipped woodshop, gave his boys access to the tools and advice needed to begin building skis for family and friends.

Today, Shaggy’s Copper Country Skis offers more than 19 models of downhill skis, ranging in performance characteristics best suited for everything from the bumps to groomed trails, ice, crud, or deep powder. They offer widths from 80-120 mm underfoot, where they can build your custom ski from the ground up, topped with custom graphics.

Shaggy’s crafts its high-performing custom skis using the best materials available, with a select cut Northern Michigan ash hardwood core that provides an extraordinarily long and hearty grain to give the skis longevity

Word spread, and the dental niche market generated additional internet orders. The goal was to have face shield kits out the door as fast as possible.

and unsurpassed rebound. Shaggy’s wraps this core with a blend of triaxial fiberglass and unidirectional carbon fiber or with a combination of biaxial and unidirectional carbon fiber for ultra-light touring. The necessary equipment, skill, and craftsmanship are more complex than needed to make PPE face shields.

Still, Jeff, his employees, and health care workers, including dentists and first responders across the state and the nation, are grateful they had an opportunity to repurpose their operations to make a difference in fighting the pandemic. ●

Christopher Smiley is MDA editor and editor-in-chief of the MDA Journal. The Shaggy’s Skis website is www.skishaggys.com.

MDA Winter Scientific Session Welcomes Shaggy’s Skis

To thank Michigan dentists for their support, Shaggy’s plans to hold a Demo-Day at Crystal Mountain Resort in Thompsonville, Mich, during the MDA Winter Scientific Session, on Jan. 6-8.

If you’re attending Winter Scientific Session, stop by. It’s a fantastic opportunity to take the family on a ski weekend, earn CE, and try out a new pair of skis.

For details on Winter Scientific Session, see the two-page advertisement on Pages 64-65 of this issue.



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