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Swapping Sails for Face Shields



Tim Carlson, Owner Sailcrafters

Marines are known for jumping in first and responding to a crisis with vigor and with a plan. Ex-Marine Tim Carlson of Sailcrafters saw a need in late March, just as the COVID-19 virus was affecting his community. His plan, use the 630-pound roll of clear plastic in his shop, used to create windows in sails, for face shields to protect healthcare workers.

The COVID-19 virus is spread between people who are in close contact with each other or through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The face shield, along with a face mask, is a critical piece of personal protection equipment (PPE). And back in March, there was a national shortage of all types of PPE.

Inspired by an industry article on the re-use of this plastic, Tim connected with a few close friends, all local, and all equally enthusiastic. Funding came early and generously from John Graves and the Graves Foundation, allowing for the acquisition of additional materials. Tim modified the design, so no sewing was necessary, just comfortable foam adhered to the shield with sticky tape and Velcro.

The plastic was cut for free by Dave Simpson, who had business connections with Cedar Box Company of Minneapolis, which lent him the use of their table cutter. The foam was sourced from American Converters in Fridley, cutting 10,000 pieces in a week and a half. Even the Velcro was purchased from a local supplier. Materials for 50 face shields were then assembled in boxes at Sailcrafters by employee Rick Kane, while co-worker Vicki Staudte connected with the sailing community.

Then the real magic happened.

Daily, community volunteers appeared at Sailcrafters to pick up boxes to assemble at home. After getting into a rhythm, it would take an hour or two to complete a box of 50. Some volunteers built over 1,000. By the end of April, 10,000 face shields were assembled. The distribution was free and swift. Anyone was welcome to come to Sailcrafters and pick up the face shields to bring to places in need. An oral surgeon distributed 1,000 to dental clinics. St. Louis Park Fire Chief handed out 4,000 to nursing homes and assisted living facilities in his city, and Dr. Richard Kyle brought 1,000 to Hennepin Healthcare.

"Thanks to John Graves, Tim Carlson and the volunteers that made this happen. The caregivers at HCMC are forever grateful to the Sailcraft group for keeping them safe. These volunteers are truly healthcare heroes," shares Dr. Kyle.

Since launching this effort in late March, 26,000 Sailcrafter face shields have been produced, all except 3,000, have been distributed for free to over 150 different facilities. "The idea from the very beginning was to provide this protection for free," shared Tim. "I feel pretty good about how all of this happened. All the volunteers and support it attracted was just amazing."

Today, national manufacturing of face shields has started to catch up with demand. However, thanks to the rapid response of an elite group of volunteers, healthcare workers are protected while they put themselves in harm's way caring for others. A situation an ex-marine knows all too well.