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## HANDCRAFTING NOSTALGIA

# ONE BEACH CHAIR AT A TIME

BY MADRA MCDONALD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MODUS PHOTOGRAPHY

Filmmaker Bruce Brown opens his legendary surf flick *The Endless Summer* with the famous line: “Summer means many different things to different people.” For those who have vacationed along Florida’s Gulf Coast or in any of the seaside resort towns in the South, seeing classic beach chairs dotting the shore brings to mind the feeling that summer has finally arrived.

Providing comfort for lounging by the sea under the cool shade of a matching umbrella, the canvas-wrapped wooden beach chair has become symbolic of a beach vacation. Between the months of March and October, area beach service professionals are up at sunrise to set up the iconic chairs and umbrellas in neat rows along the shore. These chairs, rented by the day or by the week, were all of average quality and manufactured who knows where. That is, until local beach vendor Brad McDowell decided to improve upon the quality of the chairs by manufacturing them himself on the Gulf Coast. Since 2012, when Sunrise Chair Co. made its debut, McDowell’s chairs have become a source of pride on the white-sand beaches of Scenic Highway 30-A and beyond.

A native of Tennessee, McDowell spent every summer as a child vacationing with his family along the beaches of Northwest Florida. His travels to the area while growing up helped to shape his perspective on what running a beach service entailed and to fuel his passion for customer service.

“I come from a family where my father worked 90 percent of the year so we could enjoy the other 10 percent at the beach,” recalls



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McDowell. “When we left, my brother and sister would be crying because we didn’t want to leave. But the tears would stop, and we’d all start talking about when we were coming back next year.”

In 2000, McDowell and his wife were longing for the laid-back vibe of the coast and decided to relocate from Tennessee to Miramar Beach, Florida, to experience the beach lifestyle full-time. Shortly after, McDowell opened Sunny Sands Beach Service. He and his staff have logged thousands of hours working from sunup to sundown to service the vacationing families who enthusiastically flock to the beach each year. That’s two hundred and forty-eight days a year for over a decade for him and his crew.

The customer service philosophy at Sunny Sands Beach Service comes from McDowell’s days of working the beach by himself to ensure that every one of his customers had the best possible experience. “If we can make something happen for our customers, we’ll go above and beyond to get it done, no matter how small the request,” he says. “Their happiness is our number one priority.”

This steadfast dedication to customer service eventually led McDowell to grow his beach service company in an ambitious direction. The industry was clearly overburdened by the problem of too much demand, which resulted in a less-than-desirable turnaround on supply, so McDowell determined it would be better to take matters into his own hands—literally—and manufacture his own chairs. He began researching ways not only to build beach chairs but also to make improvements over the ones he had been purchasing for years from a national manufacturer.

“Anybody can order a thousand chairs from overseas and say they’re in the industry,” jokes McDowell. “I’ve always been a hands-on kind of guy. When I was a kid, my imagination went into building forts, and later, as a licensed contractor, that same imagination transferred into building a couple’s dream home. So, I welcomed the challenge when





I had to engineer my own tools to create these chairs. We hand dip each chair with marine-grade varnish. It wasn't easy, but my love for the beach and my passion for attention to detail, combined with living the lifestyle year-round, became what Sunrise Chair Co. is today."

As a team, Brad and his wife, Jenny, who runs the day-to-day administrative operations of the business and performs the selfless job of corralling their two energetic sons, Ross and Reed, have managed to balance the high-speed pace of family life and two thriving businesses. With the addition of fellow beach service owner and Louisiana native Boo Freeman, McDowell is confident he's got the perfect team around him. "Without them, I'm nothing. We've worked very hard to build a great team, and now we're mass-producing high-quality chairs right here at the beach," McDowell says with a big smile. "Boo has played an integral part in managing quality control and design, and he has a similar work ethic to mine. The energy he brings to the table is invaluable."

From the rustproof brass hardware to the white oak milled in the Southeast, Sunrise Chair Co. proudly sources only USA-based materials. Every detail of the chairs has been researched, analyzed, and inspected—and then analyzed some more. Being able to withstand the harsh elements of the outdoors meant no detail was too small to nitpick, right down to the hand-sewn binding on the Sunbrella fabric and the specially treated wood, which is dipped twice in a resilient marine-grade varnish.

"When I found out that Brad was pursuing a vision of building his own brand of beach chairs, I was a complete fan," said Destin Health and Fitness owner Vince Walker. "Having a background in beach chair rentals is one thing, but not many people know that Brad brings a general contractor license to the table as well. His knowledge of quality and craftsmanship with woodworking is one that is unparalleled in the business of beach chair construction."

Mike Ragsdale, founder of the beloved 30A.com lifestyle brand, was among the first to take advantage of Sunrise Chair Co.'s custom embroidery option. A turquoise chair marked with the classic 30A logo is available for purchase on 30A's online retail hub, 30AGear.com. Ragsdale says, "We love supporting local businesses, and it makes it so easy when that business produces the highest-quality product in their industry. We are so proud to see our famous 30A logo on Sunrise Chair Co.'s chairs."

EVERY DETAIL OF THE CHAIR HAS BEEN RESEARCHED, ANALYZED, INSPECTED, AND ANALYZED SOME MORE.

With the chairs handcrafted locally in Santa Rosa Beach, now everyone (everywhere) has a quality go-to source for scooping up a classic beach chair lounge for the backyard, the deck, or the next beach outing—and word is spreading beyond the beach, as online orders are starting to flood in from as far away as Alaska and Belgium.

"People just love being reminded of their time on the Gulf," McDowell says. "At the end of the day, we are beach guys making beach chairs. We understand that the products we make are tied to the memories that families make during their time here. If we can provide something that fosters that connection to the beach wherever they are, then we've done our job." ■

Visit [sunrisechairco.com](http://sunrisechairco.com) to learn more.



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