



Photo by Liz Gotthelf

# JENNIFER LEVIN of Chilton Furniture

*Keeping Alive American Traditions of Simple, Clean Lines*

BY LIZ GOTTHELF

When first talking to Jennifer Levin, president of Chilton furniture, you would think she had been in the furniture business her whole life.

She speaks enthusiastically and knowledgeably about the company's products—high-quality furniture made in America—and she can tell at a glance what type of wood is used in any particular piece and its style and level of craftsmanship.

However, prior to 2014, when she and husband Jared bought the long-established business, she didn't have any experience in the field.

Jennifer and her family were living in New York. Jared was working as an investment banker, and she had retired from a career as a corporate attorney to raise their three daughters. When their youngest child was in school, she decided she wanted to go back to work but that she needed a change. Jennifer had strong ties to Maine—she spent summer vacations in Ocean Park and had graduated from Bates College. So, naturally her thoughts turned that direction.

"I actually Googled 'businesses to buy in Maine,' and Chilton Furniture came up on the first page," she said.

Jennifer was impressed with the longevity of the business, which was established in 1885, and its dedication to Shaker-style wood furniture made in America with simple, clean lines.

Though the two didn't have any experience in the furniture-making business or design, Jared used his skills in finance and Jennifer used skills from her career in law and assessed the business. They decided it was a good investment and a good fit.

"Once we decided to buy the company, I looked closely at the furniture and said, 'If we're going to do this, I want it to feel like my voice. I think it needs to reflect who we are,'" she said.

She found a designer who took the time to get to know her and who listened.

"He really understood what I was going for and was able to translate it into pieces [of furniture]," she said.



Working with and being “vertically integrated” with the designer and local craftsmen, Jennifer said the company isn’t just curating items but is actively a part of the process of making quality items. She knows that people will have these strong, appealing, durable items in their homes for decades and in some cases, will pass them down as heirlooms to future generations.

Jennifer said one of the biggest pieces of advice she can give to other aspiring business owners was one of the biggest challenges she faced, and that was that she couldn’t do everything.

“That has been humbling because my background, being a lawyer, I felt that I needed to do it all myself,” she said. But she came to see the matter differently. “You need people who are invested in your vision and who can make a commitment and show to you that they care, and then let them have a little space to do it.”

“I felt like once we all got on the same page of what the vision is, I’ve been able to watch as each of my team members has contributed something really, really necessary. And it’s made this place much better. It’s been amazing how it’s all come together,” she said.

In the six years since Jennifer and Jared bought Chilton Furniture, they’ve made some updates to the furniture, while still honoring the Shaker traditions. The company is known for timeless pieces with clean lines—for simple designs that would be right at home in a farmhouse or a city apartment. In addition to the Shaker line, Chilton Furniture also offers Modern, Craftsmen, and Live Edge lines.

The pieces now tend to be treated with a clear stain to show off the wood’s natural beauty. The showroom in Portland has a wide palette of colors, including red cherry wood, chocolate-toned walnut, tan Maple wood, and light-colored Ash wood.

The Portland show room, located on Commercial Street, is spacious, with high ceilings, brick walls, and soft lighting. It’s open and uncluttered. Jennifer attributes some of her aesthetics to time spent in Japan. Each piece is deliberately placed to give it breathing room and allow it to be focused on. Items are decorated with soft sheepskin, pottery that contains sand from Maine beaches, and locally made candles.

“Everything that we put in here, we really believe helps people ground themselves.

And that is how I feel about wood furniture—that it’s very grounding,” she said.

Jennifer said that she knows many people who have started businesses and understands that process can be hard, but she’s learned that buying an established business and making it your own also poses some challenges. It’s important to be aware of the customers and your internal team and what their expectations are.

“It’s almost like shifting a boat, a large steamer. You have to make a little change in the turns, and the changes take years because you can’t just automatically change everything,” she said. If you make changes too quickly, you could alienate customers.

Chilton Furniture still carries on the tradition of American-made products. The company collaborates with the Sabbathday Lake Shakers of New Gloucester—the only remaining active Shaker community in the country—to make the Alfred Village chair.

When Jennifer and Jared bought Chilton Furniture, 27 percent of the furniture production was in Maine, and now it’s about 60 percent. Jennifer said that in 2018, in an effort to meet a goal

of selling more Maine-made products, the company overbooked Maine furniture builders, and there was a backup. They offered discounts, like free shipping, when orders were delayed. They are learning from that experience and thinking through plans more, in advance and from all angles. They work with furniture builders both in Maine and out of state, with the continued goal to increase production in Maine.

Whatever lies ahead to learn and do, one factor remains unchanging for the woman at the helm of the ship: an appreciation for the beauty and pleasing functionality of well-made wood furniture. As Jennifer puts it, "I love the texture that wood can impart to a room. I love the smell of it, I love the touch of it, and the color of the grain." That admiration for wood, shown to advantage with simple, clean lines, is a steadfast constant.

*Chilton Furniture has showrooms in Portland, Scarborough, and Freeport. For more information on Chilton Furniture, go to [www.chiltons.com](http://www.chiltons.com).* •



Photo by Jeff Roberts

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