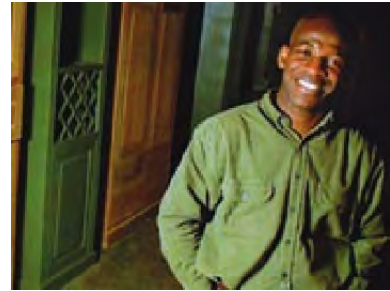




Building the American Dream

Ghana immigrant and Lynchburg entrepreneur/master craftsman
Thomas Johnson arrived in the U.S. with \$20 in his pocket and a skill



BY CLIFF GLICKMAN

Thomas Johnson's unique version of the American Dream has him forging through the recession.

The 46-year-old immigrant from Ghana has just opened a retail outlet at his downtown Lynchburg furniture factory, the first of what he envisions as a network of related businesses. Fundraising has begun and a board is in place—not to mention a roof—to begin moving forward on his plans for a \$2 million center to train future entrepreneurs in a variety of wood-working skills.

And Johnson reports, recession or not, 2009 will be a record sales year for his company.

"I like the recession," Johnson says. "Everyone gets depressed.

Then they say, 'I can't do it anymore.'"

That leaves less competition for the entrepreneur that's creative enough to keep finding ways to succeed. "The people who find the treasure in the trash will always win," Johnson adds.

"I love your vision," Lynchburg Mayor **Joan Foster** told Johnson during a recent visit to his factory. "I'm glad you picked our community to do it in."

Johnson grew up in Ghana and studied timber technology in Italy. He returned to Ghana and ran a trade school until political unrest pushed him to immigrate to the United States in 1993. Through a friend, he learned about a theology program at Liberty University, for which he received a full schol-

arship. He started Thomas A. Johnson Furniture Co. Inc. in 1996 in a small downtown Lynchburg site and completed the Liberty program a year later.

In 2001, Johnson moved to larger facilities off the James River on the outskirts of downtown and has been steadily growing the business ever since. His furniture has become a part of a number of Lynchburg landmarks, including Bank of the James offices, Givens Books and downtown hotels Holiday Inn Select and Craddock-Terry.

Curtis Roberts, who runs a strategic communications firm called Refractive Communications, recalls meeting Johnson shortly after Johnson arrived in Lynchburg. "Way back

when at a Rotary Club meeting, he says, 'Curtis, one day I'm going to ...'" He mimics Johnson, spreading his arms to indicate Johnson's massive facility. "He's a man you can truly believe when he tells you something."

Roberts chairs the new board Johnson created to help guide the launch—and, hopefully, future operations—of a school that would teach wood-working and related skills to budding entrepreneurs and craftsmen. Opening is probably at least two years away, but the board has begun early work toward creating a legal entity for the school, developing a curriculum, securing accreditation and recruiting faculty, among other things. The school would be housed in a section of the existing

All photos courtesy of Thomas A. Johnson



On the left: Johnson's Serpentine conference table, constructed of reclaimed lumber in heart pine. On the right: Johnson's wood creations in the Craddock Terry hotel of Lynchburg. All wood pieces shown here are Johnson's work

facility, which just replaced the roof over the section.

Johnson is raising the funds, in part, through sales of a particular table, the Cherry Vision table. The company has sold about 250 of the tables; 100 percent of the proceeds of each sale go toward the \$2 million Johnson anticipates in start-up costs.

Borrowing from that idea, Johnson has created another table from which a portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Lynchburg, a wine cellaret to help raise money for the United Way of Central Virginia, and a bed and night stand from the Craddock Terry Hotel to help raise money for the American Cancer Society. As a marketing idea, "This is more personal," says **Heather Bonawitz**, design director of the new retail outlet James River Furnishings. "It's really reaching where the people care."

The combination of building his business while helping to build the community has been a consistent theme in Johnson's career. That extends to his hiring style. He has been known to hire people who have walked through his doors off the street, once they show they have the work ethic to contribute.

Even one of his latest key hires came from a similarly informal meeting. Bonawitz had been in design for many years. She had heard of Johnson's business and wanted to visit. By the time the visit was over, Johnson was on his way to putting Bonawitz in charge of launching James River Furnishings. The company had its ribbon-cutting earlier this month.

James River is just the start of Johnson's vision for several related companies, including a hardware-building supplies business and a separate company that would handle administration, finance, marketing and other functions. By the time this article goes to press and you read it, it's likely Johnson will have come up with a couple more ideas for new businesses.

"I'm just a vehicle, just a conduit," Johnson says. "For me, this is all about creating a legacy of love."

(Cliff Glickman is a freelance writer and corporate communications consultant in Lynchburg.)

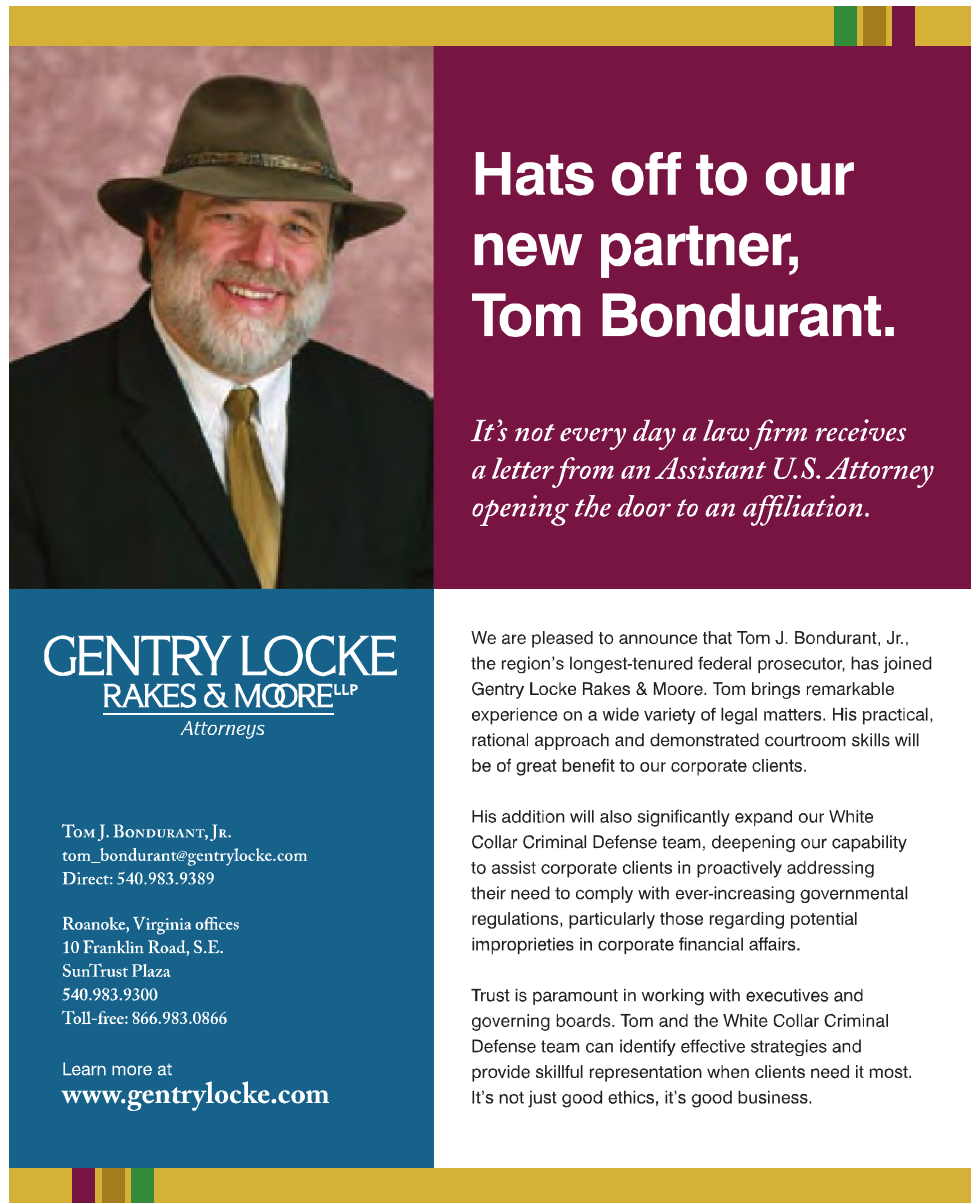
For more information visit www.thomasjohnsonfurniture.com, call (434) 845-9035 or visit the showroom at 1612 Concord Tpke. in Lynchburg. It's open weekdays from 8 am to 5 pm.



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GENTRY LOCKE
RAKES & MOORE^{LLP}
Attorneys

Tom J. BONDURANT, JR.
tom_bondurant@gentrylocke.com
Direct: 540.983.9389

Roanoke, Virginia offices
10 Franklin Road, S.E.
SunTrust Plaza
540.983.9300
Toll-free: 866.983.0866

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