Music Merchants trade show when she was six weeks old and sweeping floors around her parents’ factory as a toddler.

When she was 5, Deering created colorful comic purses out of materials her mother provided to keep her busy at a music all-boys band and sold them to her parents’ vendor booth. She earned her first paycheck at age 8.

“Getting the paycheck every Friday really taught me the value of honest work and what it means to make your own money,” she said.

Running the company was definitely a plan Deering was ready for, but the move to CEO for the 43-year-old came with some unexpected strings—the kind that only a pandemic could bring.

COVID-19 threw an immediate sour note into what should have been a seamless transition, state health guidelines closing the business for six weeks, from mid-March through the early part of May 2020.

While Deering had to furlough all but a handful of employees, the orders for banjos not only kept coming but actually increased.

Website Picks Up Steam During Pandemic

“Our website exploded,” Deering said as people suddenly had more time on their hands and were stuck inside their homes rediscovering the joy of playing live music—including the banjo.

As the pandemic progressed, the emails and phone calls from mom-and-pop shops that sell Deering banjos took on extra urgency as shopkeepers struggled to keep banjos in stock. Some shop owners asked Deering to mail banjos directly to their homes so they could ship them to their growing customer base.

A month before the pandemic hit, Deering’s company closed a deal to buy the brand Propik, one of the top-selling finger picks for banjo players.

Janet Deering went back to the factory, threw herself into learning how to ship items, and also was able to practice making the picks. She had learned the pick-making skill the previous year, along with Deering master banjo builder Chad Kopotic.

Kopotic, 45, has been with the company more than 25 years, and notes “we’ve grown three times bigger since I first started.”

He told Deering he wanted to keep working and kept at the craft during the pandemic, largely alone in the main part of the factory, assembling as many banjos as he could.

“I really enjoy the work,” Kopotic said. “I’m not a musician myself but I love seeing people enjoy the fruits of our labor and talking with musicians, hearing the feedback about how they like playing music with our banjos.”

Getting Back on Track

Somewhere, Jamie Deering made it all work, and was eventually able to bring back her entire staff of 42 employees when the state mandates forcing businesses closures finally eased.

“We were really lucky in how the dominoes fell for us, I know that is a fact, and it is not lost on me,” Deering said. “But I will say we were really smart about it, we didn’t take our foot off the pedals in figuring it out. We didn’t go into worrying, we just moved into what we do need to do, how do we figure it out so we’re moving the best direction for everybody.”

Deering’s success appears poised to continue. Last year, the company sold 8,456 banjos, 1,000 more than in 2020 when it sold 7,113.

In all, Deering said the company has made more than 164,000 banjos in nearly 47 years of business.

The focus moving forward for the company is re-doing its tooling, which is more than 20 years old.

“We just hired an engineer to work with my dad and our team to do our next-generation tooling, which is going to add a new dimension, in a couple of weeks,” Deering said. “It will speed up the process, help us with less room for error and that will help us use less material and make everybody’s job out there easier.”

Deering said that getting through the pandemic was not just about the loss of work for her employees. She said the other part of the equation was difficulty in procuring materials needed to create the banjos.

Many items that the company needed to make the banjos were hard to come by, and were not available for purchase in some cases in the U.S.

She said that some resources like metal and powder coating that its vendors purchased had to come from outside the country because of the difficulty finding them locally.

Connecting Banjo Players Around the World

“It was very eye opening how reliant America has become on other countries,” Deering said. “I think that’s the biggest thing we as business community leaders need to start working on. We already knew this was an issue in the music industry. We work so hard to stay American made.”

Deering said she heard from people across the U.S. during the pandemic, many of whom were seeking to rediscover the joy that music brought them. A few told her they had recently taken their banjo out after many years and couldn’t figure out how to tune it.

Because of that, Kopotic and Deering started hosting live Q&A music talks with banjo fans on Instagram and Facebook, helping connect people in a time when many were alone.

That later morphed into the current “Deering live” shows in which Deering COO Jamie Latty conducts online interviews and lessons with other banjo players from around the world.

“When we went to a festival for the first time in many months, last September, people told us, ‘Thanks so much for doing those videos,’” Deering said. “It really was a way to connect the banjo community during a hardship.”

— Kayla Tingle