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From Irene's Waters to Triumph: WallGoldfinger Persevered



WallGoldfinger Chief Operating Officer Michael Spencer talks to fellow manufacturers from around the state at a forum on Friday at the Randolph furniture manufacturer's plant. (Provided)

Everyone likes a comeback story.

Manufacturers visiting WallGoldfinger in [Randolph](#) last Friday got just that.

In a forum organized by the Vermont Manufacturing Extension Center, WallGoldfinger Chief Operating Officer Michael Spencer and Woodshop Supervisor Will Francis told the tale of the high-end furniture manufacturer once devastated by Tropical Storm Irene's floodwaters and now, not only back from the brink, but better than ever.

WallGoldfinger designs, engineers, manufactures and installs executive furniture, including custom boardroom and conference tables, lecterns and credenzas featured in some of the world's largest companies and government agencies.

These [Vermont](#)-made products in stunning wood veneers, glass, stone and more occupy the [White House](#), New York Stock Exchange, International Monetary Fund, United Nations and many of the nation's largest businesses.

Where's the story?



6 Points Mentioned

The company got its start in 1971 in [Warren](#), moved to [Northfield](#) to the Nantanna Woolen Mill in 1976, but was severely flooded in Tropical Storm Irene on Aug. 28, 2011.

Locals knew of the tragedy. The outside world? Not so much.

Not wanting to dishearten clients, the company kept quiet about the loss, describing it as only a "moisture" problem.

In reality six-and-a-half feet of raging water from the Dog River filled the first floor of the plant, jostling hand tools and wood everywhere and leaving a two-inch coating of silt behind. Water even reached the second story office space, but to a far lesser degree.

Computers, the server, and office staff moved to a room in the multi-use Gray Building in [Northfield](#), working shoulder to shoulder for months. Woodworkers filled 16 20-yard dumpsters with debris plus three more were filled with huge, expensive machinery ruined by the water and silt.

"It was a huge effort. We probably spent eight weeks cleaning up. We had tremendous help. Norwich Cadets came over [along with] friends and family," said Spencer, who had watched the flood waters rise and take over the plant in just 20 minutes on that Sunday in August that many [Vermonters](#) will remember for a lifetime.

Work was subcontracted, furniture safely stored in second story factory space was shipped as soon as two days after the flood, and WallGoldfinger staff grappled with the question of what would come next.

"Everyone was determined we were going to stay in business," said Spencer.

WallGoldfinger moved into a spacious, modern factory space on Hull Street in [Randolph](#) in part of the former Ethan Allen furniture plant in 2012.

It was a clean slate.

The [Northfield](#) factory was filled with posts that made moving, and building, large pieces of furniture challenging. The pieces were moved between floors on a 1929 elevator that no company in the state would service.

Lean Principles

Looking at an expanded, bright, clean, one-story space with high ceilings in [Randolph](#), the company mapped out workflows and began putting something it started in [Northfield](#)—Lean principles—more fully into practice.

It was Lean principles, and the company's story, that 30 manufacturers from around the state came to learn about on Friday in the VMEC forum titled "Turning Tragedy into Triumph: How WallGoldfinger

Re-Built and Survived after Tropical Storm Irene."

WallGoldfinger began working with VMEC in 2009 before the flood. The idea took hold with a small group of woodworkers undergoing training and incremental changes.

“We thought there was no way we could get more efficient. We thought we were doing a good job. We didn’t know enough,” said Spencer.

With Lean, a manufacturing initiative to reduce waste and improve efficiency, WallGoldfinger built shadow boards, outlining where tools were stored, color coding them with a strip of tape by department to replace cluttered toolboxes. It put up whiteboards to communicate about jobs and it got rid of a lot of unneeded supplies.

The company had “430 boxes of hardware ‘just in case you need it,’” Francis recalled. Among the shelf after shelf of supplies was bed hardware. The company has never built a bed. There was “every screw you could buy, ‘just in case,’” said Francis. And if something was cheaper by the thousands, it was bought by the thousands even if only 200 were needed.

No More

In [Randolph](#), the efforts have only grown.

Today, small quantities of hardware and hand tools are stored on wheeled carts, with tool locations outlined on shadow boards and tools color coded. If a job requires only five of the 12 drill bits that come in a set, only five of the drill bits are supplied.

Glue and all that one needs to go with it, such as rollers and gloves, are on another cart. Even the floor brooms have a shadow board so woodworkers don’t have to search the 60,000-square-foot plant looking for them.

Manufacturers who attended Friday’s forum, which included a talk and tour of the new facility, saw example after example of these small Lean principles in practice. Each on their own Lean journey, the participants took notes and snapped pictures to bring back to their own factories and businesses, as well as shared their successes in [Vermont’s](#) surprisingly robust manufacturing sector, that through trainings like this VMEC is striving to support and grow.

WallGoldfinger certainly credits part of its success to the Randolph Center-based non-profit.

“VMEC has been a great help for us over the years,” said Spencer, who has been with WallGoldfinger for 26 years.

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