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The grandson of invention

'Bed Bar' counts sales in hundreds

By PHOEBE MITCHELL
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WESTHAMPTON — What began as a gesture of familial support has turned into a solid business venture for David Brown and his family.

When his grandmother broke her hip three years ago, Brown, a mechanical engineer at Northeast Utilities in West Springfield, used his expertise to create a device to help her get in and out of bed while she was convalescing from her fall.

Since then, Brown has discovered that his invention — a device he christened the "Bed Bar" — meets the needs of many elderly and convalescent people. Since he began to market his invention, Brown has sold 100 bed bars and has orders for 100 more. Business is so brisk, he said, he hasn't been able to make the bars fast enough.

For now, the fledgling business splits its operation between a local machine shop, where the bar is manufactured, and a Chesterfield Road home where Brown, 32, has lived for five years with his wife, Donna, and their two daughters, Laura, 3, and Samantha, 1.

Except for manufacturing, every aspect of the the bed bar business is done in the Brown home. An 800 phone number has been installed for taking orders and answering customer's questions.

Sitting in his dining room, which is crowded with three-foot square cardboard "Bed Bar" shipping boxes, Brown pointed to a market brochure for the bar picturing his 89-year-old grandmother on the front cover. She is sitting on a bed holding a curved metal bar, in the shape of an upside down "U," which is attached to the frame at the head of the bed.

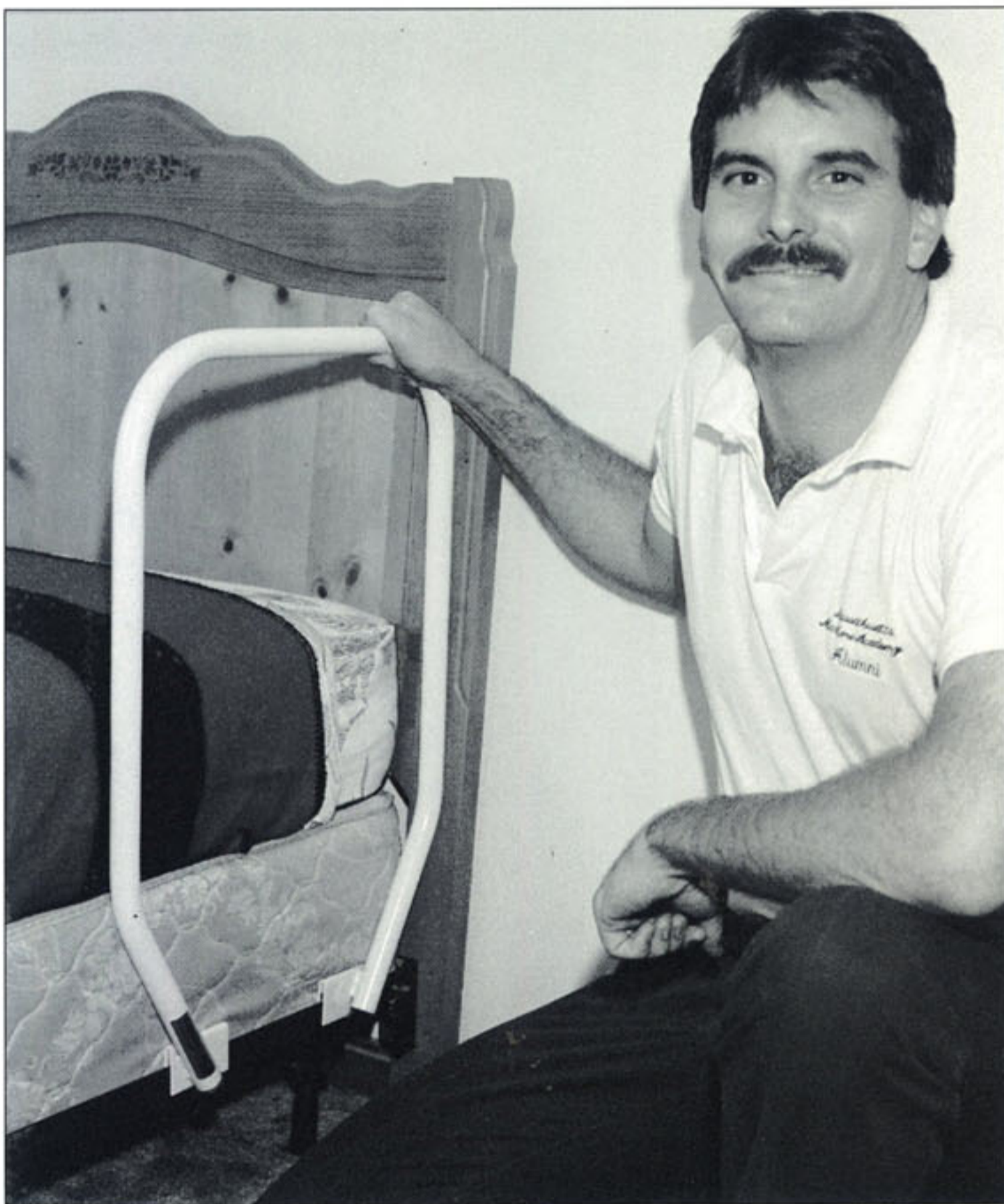
Brown explained that when his grandmother, who lives in Millbury, returned home from the hospital, she tried to use a walker to help her in and out of bed. "She would hold onto the walker and sit down on her bed — and that was okay — but when she went to get up, she would be trying to pull herself up and the walker would move because it wasn't attached," he said.

The bar, he pointed out, gives her something similar in height and feel to the walker but is fixed in place. And Brown tried to make it as aesthetically pleasing and unobtrusive as possible. "I painted hers pink, which matched her bedspread," said Brown, "She loved it."

And her praise got Brown thinking.

"She was praising this bar so much that I wondered how much of this was simply grandson-pride and how much it was really helping her out," said Brown.

He finally became convinced of the bar's usefulness after his wife, a registered nurse who works at a Greenfield health care agency and part-time as the Westhampton Elementary School nurse, pointed out that there were no similar devices available for home-bound convalescents. After a number



RICHARD CARPENTER

David Brown made the first "Bed Bar" to help his grandmother. Now, with the help of his wife, Donna, and a friend, he sells the device, marketed to the elderly and infirm, throughout New England.

of health care professionals seconded her opinion, he decided to see if he could market the idea.

Working nights and weekends, Brown, who received a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Massachusetts Maritime Academy in Buzzard's Bay in 1983, went through about 13 prototypes before he ended up with a simple and sturdy way of attaching the bar to the bed. He now has a patent pending for three different models, which can be used on metal, wood and hospital beds. The standard model is white and retails for \$79.

With the help of an old friend who has been handling sales and marketing, Brown said that since he founded the company — which he named Brown Engineering — it has sold bed bars locally and throughout New England to nursing homes, medical retailers and directly to customers. "We've tried to make a product that's simple and

cheap, that can be sent through the mail and installed by ordinary people," said Brown.

He added, "If it helps somebody stay comfortable in their own home a little bit longer, that's really my goal. I want to build a company initially based on this product. Once that's done, I hope to come up with other ideas to help elderly people."

Brown hopes to eventually distribute his products nationwide.

The bed bar is only the latest in a number of inventions Brown has come up with over the years, from modified dune buggies to an illuminated calligraphy table for his wife. Of late he has been trying to figure out how to power his Christmas lights with a backyard stream-fed waterwheel.

Some ideas, he admitted, have been more successful than others. And some ideas he's keeping under his hat.