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Odd man in: James builds handyman work into thriving business

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com 23 hrs ago

Bowling Green's Dustin James has taken his talent as a handyman and turned it into a thriving business.

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Odds are, Dustin James is one of the few Western Kentucky University students who drives to campus in an SUV loaded with a ladder and power tools. And the odds are good that he is in the minority when it comes to being a successful entrepreneur.

By definition a nontraditional student, the 31-year-old James has certainly broken with tradition while building his Odd Jobs of Bowling Green startup into a going concern.

A business created out of necessity, Odd Jobs has been a hit with his WKU peers and professors. Now, little more than a year after its launch, it has caught on with customers to the point that James is bringing in more as a handyman than he was making in the full-time job he left to accommodate his class schedule.

James said he built Odd Jobs of Bowling Green on an “ability to figure things out,” meaning he has a knack for teaching himself how to do chores that have value for his customers.

“I’m kinda like a handyman,” said the Smiths Grove native and 2005 Warren East High School graduate. “I don’t do the traditional carpentry, plumbing and electrical work, although I can do some of that.

“I was mounting a television yesterday. Tomorrow I could be cleaning out gutters, installing insulation or staining a deck. If I haven’t done it before, I’ll figure it out.”

But there’s more to James’ success than making himself handy, according to Dawn Bolton, director of the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation at WKU.

Pointing out that James was a winner in both the Topper Tank business pitch competition and the WKU Business Plan competition, Bolton said: “Dustin is a true student-entrepreneur success story. He used what he was learning in each of his entrepreneurship courses to develop, test, refine and launch his new business.”

James’ path to business success hasn’t been as simple as Bolton makes it sound. He enrolled in WKU right out of high school, majoring in business administration; but, as he says, “I was more interested in extracurricular activities.”

He dropped out of school and went to work as a forklift operator at Houchens Industries. He stayed five years, advancing to a supervisory role, but then decided to return to WKU and pursue a degree in entrepreneurship.

“I left (Houchens) without having a job lined up,” James said. “I worked for my dad’s lawn care company in the summer, and then I started finding jobs cleaning gutters and doing other odd jobs for extra money.

“I made some business cards and started my company in January (2017). I only made about \$200 that first month, so I didn’t know how it was going to go. But by May I had already doubled what I was making at Houchens.”

Promoting his fledgling business through social media and word of mouth, James brought in about \$40,000 last year despite being a full-time student.

“I’m not making a fortune by any means, but I get to do something different every day instead of working until two in the morning,” he said. “I enjoy what I’m doing. It’s different every single day. People get a lot of stress taken away when I do things that maybe they’ve been putting off.”

One client, Elizabeth Downing of Bowling Green’s Time Savers business that provides services to the elderly, has come to rely on James’ skills.

“We’ve been looking for that handyman component since we started seven years ago,” Downing said. “I contacted him, and now he helps our clients all the time. He can do just about anything. I think he has been more beneficial for us than we have for him.”



Another client, Sally Jackson of Bowling Green, has come to trust James to the point she has given him a key to her house.

“He’s a young man with great integrity,” Jackson said. “If he doesn’t do a job to suit you, he’ll come back and remedy the problem. He has picked up a lot of chores I’m not able to do, so I depend on him a lot. I’ve referred him to other people.”

James has established his business while going through other changes in his life. Married in September, he's also on target to finish his degree in May. His wife, Jodi James, has watched the business grow and often helps him with some of his handyman projects.

"I think we were both kinda shocked at how it took off," Jodi James said of Odd Jobs of Bowling Green. "Everyone needs different things. It has been interesting."

So interesting that Dustin James plans to continue and possibly even expand his business after he finishes his degree. In fact, his winning entry in the WKU Business Plan competition includes a plan to broaden the reach of Odd Jobs of Bowling Green.

He hopes to take what he has learned – including use of a mobile app for calculating what he charges clients, and use of social media and other marketing tools – and apply it to creating a franchise called Odd Jobs On Call.

"I have guys call me and ask if I need help," he said. "I think there's an opportunity for a small franchise."

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