

Marathon Upholstery Department

The Fabric of Luxury



Avon Kauffman (left) and the upholstery department.

by Sharleen Nelson

Marathon coaches have come a long way since the first converted bus rolled out in 1983. Over the years, the coaches have undergone numerous structural changes, evolving technology, and the advent of as many as four slide-outs, which has expanded the livable space substantially. Perhaps the most visible change, however, has been the prodigious transformation of the interior. Even as residential size appliances, granite and Corian countertops, wood-plank floors, and full-size showers have enhanced the convenience and livability, the upholstered elements have also made a dramatic impact. As the valance and sofa treatments of yesteryear have given way to today's rich palette of luxuriant soft leathers and vibrant fabrics, what once looked like a motorhome for temporary living purposes now reflects the stylish ambiance of a lavish second home.

The upholstery department's handiwork is evident throughout each coach. From the side door panels, dash, trapezoid windows, and ceiling panels to valances, headboards, dinettes, and sofas, there are 30 or more separate pieces that are either upholstered or "wrapped" (fabric or leather is actually wrapped around the piece). Small details that may go unnoticed

include hinge and shore-cord covers. Marathon upholsterers also sew fabric protectors that can be moved from one bus to another to protect certain areas while it's being worked on by other departments on the production floor.

When Upholstery Department Manager Avon Kauffman first started with the company in 1987, all the upholstery work was commissioned by outside vendors. Avon, who had his own upholstery shop at the time and did freelance work for Marathon, was instrumental in bringing upholstery in-house. "If you have it done outside, it's not always done right. When you have it in-house, you have total control of it," Avon explained. As the sole upholsterer, Avon first took on the pilot seats, eventually taking over the upholstery of the dinettes and valances. When the workload became too much for one person, he began hiring and the department steadily grew. The department now has a full-time day and swing-shift crew of 12 people. "It's amazing how much more we do, and how much more complex it is than when we first started," said Avon.

This department has had to adapt not only to changing interior design trends, but also to the addition of supplementary furniture, such as ottomans, that take advantage of the added space of four slide-outs now available in





both the H and XL models. "Things are always changing, and mainly it's customer demand," said lead upholsterer John Farley. "We didn't used to do ottomans, but now that we've got the quads, there's more room for that kind of thing."

What people may not know is that even today's high-end residential furniture is mostly mass produced. Marathon's sofas, headboards, and dinettes, however, are created from scratch, from the standard, overstuffed, and wavy sofas, to dinettes and headboards with handcrafted tufted backs, which require "deep buttoning," where the button is pulled into the cover deeply and forms a pleated diamond. "Upholstery is kind of a dying art," said John. "When you go to a factory today it's like an assembly line. Each person does one thing and then passes it along to somebody else. No one person does a job from start to finish."

"We have a very high level of quality here with the custom, handmade things that we do," said Doug Byrd, who started three years ago doing door panels. "We're not just kicking out these mass-produced pieces. Every item has an individual's signature on it."

Everything begins with interior design. Designers Jennifer Clausen and Gail Curtis—or a customer designing a custom coach for them—

self—choose everything from the fabric on the couch to the leather in the cockpit. However, for individual pieces such as headboards, ottomans, chairs, and sofas, the designer hand-sketches drawings for the upholstery department to indicate special details and placement.

With nearly 200 detailed steps for upholstering a single flange-style sofa—a sofa bed adapted to be stored within the sofa frame when in a collapsed condition—this is a 46-hour project. The designers first choose the style of sofa, and then engineering creates drawings that go to Marathon employee Don Mathews, who divides his time between making cabinets in the cabinet shop and building the bare frames at night. Don has witnessed firsthand the evolution of the sofa in his 18 years with the company. "It has changed a lot," he said. "If you look at some of our older couches, there's quite a difference. The furniture was flat and squared off; now it reflects more of a residential feel with flowing lines."

The sofas are standard in size, but often the designers or a customer will get an idea from



John Farley adds arm #2 to this custom sofa.

a magazine or other source and ask the upholstery department to produce something similar. "We are limited to certain heights because of slide-outs, but basically, we can build anything a customer wants," said John. "Our upholsterers are excited about trying new things and are always willing to try whatever possibility we come up with," said Gail. "We like to challenge them," Jennifer added. "And modifications occur throughout the entire process that sometimes we don't even know about, but it always comes about and fits in beautifully every time."

Teamwork within the department is essential, especially when it comes to doing furniture. Upholsterers John Farley and Tim Johnson rely on seamsters Kazuko Griffin and Cindy Sanders to help them create the exquisite custom sofas and dinettes, headboards, and pilot seats. "Having a good seamster is extremely important," John said. "Nothing I do will look right if it isn't sewn correctly."

After receiving the bare frame, John installs the springs, heavy-duty webbing, and two layers of foam. Likewise, Tim receives frames for the dinettes and headboards from the woodshop and applies the foam. He also upholsters the driver's side pilot seat, which comes with

the Prevost shell when it is driven here from Canada (co-pilot seats are sent out of house). Tim strips off the vinyl that it comes with, taking the seat to its raw frame, adds new foam to bulk it up, inserts a massage unit, and finishes it using a combination of adhesive glue and traditional upholstery tack methods. "For the pilot seats we put leather on plastic, so we stretch it, roll the glue out on it, and then stretch it over and bring it in on the inside," Tim said.

Kazuko and Cindy cut and sew the material. Because of its superior quality, cutting into an expensive piece of fabric can be intimidating. "The first time I had to cut into some \$400-a-yard material I was a little nervous," Avon conceded. "But you realize that it's just another piece of fabric and you have to use it and do the best you can." Expensive or not, nothing is wasted or thrown away. Large fabric remnants are saved and reused. Small pieces are gathered together and put into an employee auction. The foam is also recycled. It's chopped into smaller pieces, bagged, and sent to a recycler for shredding and reuse.

Some fabrics can be difficult to work with. Some leathers are extremely thick or stiff. Fabrics that stretch may have to have a backing



Kazuko Griffin measures and prepares to cut into a piece of fabric that will go on a sofa.



applied, and material that unravels easily must be cut out bigger and hemmed along the edges using an industrial "serger" sewing machine.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for any upholsterer is matching patterns in fabric. "We try to make everything look continuous, so if you have a pattern in the seat, you want it to flow right up the back," John said. With patterns, especially, good teamwork is vital. John and Tim work closely with Kazuko and Cindy before they begin sewing to determine where the pattern needs to lay to match up correctly. "Sometimes you don't know how it will match up until you actually get them on the piece," said Cindy. "We hate doing it, but sometimes we have to do something over, but we strive for perfection from the start."

Perfection seems to be the department's mantra and there's no such thing as cutting corners. If something isn't right, they redo it, even if it's hidden from view. "I want to do it right because I know it's there, even if nobody else does, and if it can be repaired we'll do it, as long as it's Marathon quality," said Tim. John concurs. "People may never notice a lot of what we do," he said, "but we know."

Furniture isn't the only multifaceted undertaking in this department. Will Wood, who has been with Marathon for 20 years, upholsters and installs Marathon's stunning custom door panels. Door panels are complex because of the unusually contoured pieces that must be upholstered. One door panel can take between 36 and 40 hours from start to finish, including installation. Will receives the door panel kit, which consists of the wood pieces that are pre-cut, and the lightweight plastic mold. Leather is typically used and often it can be thick, making it difficult to work with. For those instances, Will applies heat using an industrial blow-dryer that allows the leather to stretch and lay taut. "When it's hot, it forms better; you can shape it how you want," said Will.

This looks easier than it really is. "There are some challenges that are pretty significant in just wrapping leather and bending it around, avoiding dimples and creases, and getting it to lay flat and straight," said Doug, who helps Will with the door panels. "So much goes into the



An industrial blow-dryer makes stiff leather more malleable for Will Wood to stretch it taut across the door panel before stapling it down.

door panels because there are so many pieces to it," he said. "You've got numerous modifications. It comes in this plastic form and we have to reinforce it, make sure it sits level, and wrap leather all around the curves, which can be very difficult." Still, as with everyone else in the upholstery department, Will is a perfectionist. "Because it's the first thing people see, the door makes a lasting first impression, so I try to make it perfect," said Will.

Master craftsmanship, attention to the smallest details, personal pride, and a solid commitment to producing the highest quality coaches in the industry are all hallmarks of Marathon's upholstery department. "The workmanship in the upholstery department is so perfect," Gail said. "It's above and beyond what other people are doing."

"It is satisfying to go into a two-million-dollar coach and see something you built as part of the whole picture," Doug said. "With Marathon's reputation for quality, coach owners are assured that someone took great care with every small detail—right down to the custom frame underneath."

If you'd like to learn more about the upholstery department, or see how a coach is made, Marathon's Coburg, Oregon facility offers factory tours Monday through Friday at 11:30 a.m. •