



Emergency services wouldn't let Speke and Klein back into the building for two days. The rain did more damage than the tornado.

what the dollars we spend at trade shows can do for us in other areas." That summer, Speke was considering a direct mail or advertising campaign to build the company brand.

**When Speke saw** the black cloud outside, she knew something out of the ordinary was going on. She crossed the 10 steps to the top of the stairs leading down to the main floor, then glanced out the window again. The wind, rain and lightning had, by this point, reached such a crescendo that she dropped to the floor. At that moment, the tornado, which had been approaching unseen from the other side of the building, ripped the roof off right over her head. The exterior wall with the windows fell out and the interior wall next to her fell on her, pinning her leg and gashing one foot. "It was quite terrifying," she says. "I was screaming the whole time." Because the bank of filing cabinets along the wall kept it from falling completely down on her, Speke had enough room to pull herself free without serious injury. Klein had gone into the foyer of the building to close the front door, and when he walked back into the shop it was all over and the roof was gone. In 15 seconds, Speke Klein's building was completely demolished.

Speke's and Klein's gut reactions to the disaster were identical. "A few minutes after it happened, we both said 'I guess we're going to have to rebuild,'" Speke says. "We had a really strong feeling that we wanted to rebuild and take the opportunity to get bigger and better. I think we are both the kind of people who get up when we are down and keep fighting. Also, you keep thinking 'What else are we going to do?'"

**Speke and Klein** have made every effort to turn the situation to their advantage. Speke contacted customers immediately to tell them about the ca-

Profile: Speke Klein, Durham, Ont.

## Sun after the storm

**A**t 4 p.m. on August 29, 2009, Robin Speke looked out the window and saw a black cloud. She was working on her laptop in the second-floor office of Speke Klein, the furniture-manufacturing business she owns with her husband, Thomas Klein, in Durham, Ont. Both are Parnham College graduates, but Speke has gravitated toward design and Klein spends most of his time on production. They met at the college and decided to return to North America to start their own furniture business. Klein is Swiss by birth, but had lived in the U.S. for many years. Speke, originally from Toronto, did not want to live in the U.S. so the couple initially set up shop in a garage near Rockwood, Ont. They outgrew that garage after four years and moved to Durham, where they already owned property. On the day Speke looked out the window and saw a cloud, Speke Klein had been in business for 10 years.

Prior to that day in August, Speke

and Klein had been considering their next steps for the business. "We compete with a lot of furniture coming from Europe," Speke explains. "They have container loads landing in port in the U.S., then they distribute them once they are stateside which is a lot cheaper in the long run than shipping from Canada to the U.S. If you are shipping one shipment from Durham to San Diego — let's say a cabinet — it could cost \$500. They get their many bits and pieces off the ship from Italy and it costs \$600. Crossing the border is the expensive part. Once you are in the States the transportation costs are so cheap it is unreal." Having established key channels into the high-end markets it wanted, the company needed to generate pull in those markets in order to increase volumes and make its shipping dollars go farther. "Our stumbling block is people see our product and say 'It is beautiful, but we have not heard of you before,'" Speke says. "We want to see



Building awareness of its brand will be Speke Klein's first priority once the reconstruction is finished. At left, Robin Speke is ready to meet buyers; Thomas Klein is below.



tastrophe, reassure them the company was not going out of business and offer them opportunities to cancel existing orders. Almost all were willing to wait for the shop to be rebuilt. Speke keeps them updated on the reconstruction project with a blog and an email newsletter. Quick communication with the bank was also important, Speke says, to establish a plan to cover the gap in cash flow. She says the insurance company has been easy to deal with because there is no doubt about the cause of the damages.

Fourteen weeks after the torna-

do the roof is on Speke Klein's new, 6,000-square-foot building. The new shop will include a five-axis CNC router, which Speke says will open up new design possibilities for her, and make mass customization possible for Klein. The two hope to use the new machinery to do more millwork, expanding their offering to architects and designers. In an industry where many have fallen to price competition and high labour costs, Speke Klein looks poised to emerge from this much more direct threat even stronger than before. 

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