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Ports. man loves to fiddle around

Goldenberg calls his craft the pinnacle of instrument-making

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PORTSMOUTH - With no formal academic training in instrument making, Todd Goldenberg makes violins that the pros call first-class.

The New Jersey native is proof that the subject a person studies in college often is not the career he or she pursues.

A botany major at the University of New Hampshire, Goldenberg makes and repairs violins, violas, and cellos from a studio in the Button Factory on Islington Street.

Goldenberg, who has played the guitar since age 12, learned his craft the old fashioned way. He apprenticed as a violin repairer during the week and made violins on his kitchen table at night.

"It made for a very long day," Goldenberg, now 40, says.

After graduating from UNH, Goldenberg happened upon the idea of making instruments when a friend was refinishing a guitar.

"The idea popped into my head, 'Someone has to make guitars; why don't I?'" said the North Berwick, Maine resident.

It seemed like a great idea, despite the fact Goldenberg didn't know anyone who could teach him and had never done much woodworking.

"There was a hammer and a screwdriver in my house and that was the entire tool collection," he said.

In the fall of 1975, Goldenberg be-

gan working for a guitar maker in Oregon, a job he kept for more than two years.

He switched to making violins - "the pinnacle of instrument-making" - after being offered a spot in a rigorous training program in Chicago. Later he spent about 10 years in a Michigan shop in a tiny room with five other employees.

What keeps him in the field?

"I like going to work and everybody else I know just kinds of drags through it," said Goldenberg.

One of the reasons Goldenberg likes making violins is that there is always something to learn or to improve. Also, he gets to work with his hands and use his science background.

A lot has been written about the physics of violins, Goldenberg said. The quest of science is "getting the number" although "there's just no way you're going to measure it."

"If an instrument maker is very disciplined and controlled, he'll do well, although if he's too much that way, the machine will be cold and lack something. It's a very fine line," Goldenberg said.

"There's a point where you just have to use your eye more - the instrument will flow better even though the number might not be what it is supposed to," he said.

The first violin Goldenberg ever made took him the better part of a



Todd Goldenberg, a violin maker in Portsmouth, holds one of his violas in his studio at the Button Factory on Islington Street.

(Democrat photo - Keenan)

year. Now it takes him about a month to six weeks. Besides making about six per year, he repairs violins and makes violas and cellos.

Goldenberg works by himself in a second-floor studio of a brick building that used to house a button factory. Being on his own is something of a relief after the crowded Michigan shop, and he plays music or talks to customers if he gets lonely.

He uses only two power tools, a drill press and a grinder. For the rest of the process he uses planes, scrapers, peg reamers, gouges or other instruments.

Goldenberg's ultimate ambition is to make fiddles and have them sell when they're finished, rather than worrying about it. He would like a lifetime supply of wood and a studio closer to his home.

But for now he is content to keep

making his violins and surviving the "hair-raising" experiences that come with that. Things go wrong during the long process of making a violin, but fixing one's mistakes is one of the skills of a violin-maker.

If everything went perfectly, either the craftsman would be fooling himself or he would be ready to retire, Goldenberg said.

"It doesn't bother me that I'll never get it right," he said.