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He has got the world on a string

By Guy Nadeau
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

PORTSMOUTH — When he graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 1975, Todd Goldenberg had little notion where his bachelor of science degree in botany would take him.

Not in his wildest dreams did he imagine it would be a virtual stone's throw from the Durham campus to this Seacoast community, making and repairing, of all things, violins, violas and cellos.

But life does take its strange twists and turns, as the Princeton, N.J., native was to learn, and these days, he is anchored in a 25-foot by 20-foot room on the second floor of the old "Button Factory" on Islington Street, laboring meticulously over the wood frames of musical instruments. No hints of botany here, just the tools to shape and craft instruments to suit the sensitive ears of area musicians.

Goldenberg was to end up in Portland, Ore., not long after graduation from UNH and apprentice as a guitar maker. "I was a guitar player, so that was my natural attraction," he said. He was to move on to Chicago, making acquaintances among guitar makers but soon learning about a violin trainee shop, Bein and Fushi, "famous for its apprenticeship program."

"I got a real fast indoctrination in violin making," Goldenberg explains of his tutorship there. "After that, I came to New England and spent weeks looking for a place to open a shop. But I got a lead for Ann Arbor, Mich., and spent nine years there working for David Burguess in a full-service shop.

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/MARK WILSON

Todd Goldenberg, UNH '75, set up shop in Portsmouth five years ago.

Portsmouth violin maker is in tune with his art

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"David became a full-time [violin] maker and I was his assistant. Then, five years ago, I decided to go on my own and I've been at this location [the Button Factory] since then," he said.

Goldenberg took violin lessons while in Ann Arbor. "I studied for a couple of years and, for a man 30 years old, that was pretty hard," he said with a laugh. "I can play with enough competency to make tone adjustments but I don't claim to be a player." He plays both the guitar and violin for his own entertainment, and plays the latter "probably every day in the course of repairs."

Wood used for making his musical instruments is little evident in his modest shop, being stored instead "in a little attic" in his home in nearby North Berwick, Maine. "It's well-aged wood, thick pieces so they will dry slowly. I'm more comfortable if I can have the wood five years myself," he said. I think the conventional wisdom is that the older the wood the better. I recently got some that was probably cut in 1985. I'm comfortable with that."

He said, "There are people who make their wood cutting just for violin makers, especially in Germany, and more recently, in the United States. I made a trip to Mittenwald, Germany, three to four years ago to buy. Historically, Germany is a center of violin making, and they have a great school there.

"Spruce is used to make the tops, maple for the ribs," Goldenberg said. He said he also enjoys the varnishing phase. Most of his business emanates from New Hampshire, Maine and northern Massachusetts, and he's begun to pick up customers from Boston.

"I've been spending a lot of time lately making cellos. They're a lot of work; they're a lot more physical than violins. It's roughing them out, planing them," he said.

Calling the field "very competitive," Goldenberg points to "a degree of price warring going on. The quality of instruments out there is much higher than it was years ago. There's been a spread of knowledge."

The process of making the instruments includes utilizing a power arm and violin bed with a cam to shape it and for roughing out. Instruments used are basically the same as those employed in past centuries.

Goldenberg is the lone maker of violins listed in New Hampshire. Maine lists two and while nearly 40 shops are scattered throughout Massachusetts, "only a handful," he said, actually make them. Most are involved in repair, he said.

Goldenberg budgets his time accordingly. "When the repair work is slow, I make my instruments ahead of time," he said. He makes three sizes in violas and notes that "violins are much more standardized in styles; I've been making only one style of cello. I don't make copies. Basically, mine is a Stradivarius model. They are not intended to be copies; my influence is clear. In violin making, I guess, the trick is to be within the tradition but also be an individualist.

"There are violin makers who will make copies. They'll get an instrument and make a very good copy and do very fine work. It's very demanding. I respect them for it but that's not what I want to do," said Goldenberg. "I like to leave my individual stamp on the making of an instrument. It's like singing alone."

Noting that he does not make violin bows ("that's another specialty"), Goldenberg explained that "voicing is different between a viola and violin. The viola is an octave lower and the cello, an octave lower than that.

He said he prefers having his customers on hand come time to fine-tune an instrument. Then, perhaps they'll be prepared for renditions of Sonatas from the likes of Brahms and Schubert.