

Artists to the Rescue!: Local designers make personal protective equipment



“My mom happens to be an epidemiologist, and she sent me an N95 mask back in January, so I had an idea this might get bad,” recalls Matt Muller, co-founder of the inflatable art and design collective Pneuhaus. Pneuhaus creates installations for events, so once their schedule began to be cleared due to COVID-19 cancellations, “we were going into hibernation, and then I saw some friends in New York, who were makers, building face shields.”

“I realized our fabric cutter could cut that material a lot faster than a laser cutter could. But I realized we couldn’t source the material, because everyone on the planet is trying to purchase it. Then we were like, ‘I wonder if clear vinyl would work, because we use that all the time for inflatables, and it’s not used in medical equipment so there’s thousands of yards of it in stock.’”

Pneuhaus made prototypes of face shields, then “got some into the hands of local doctors here in Providence, and they loved them.” Their face shields were more flexible and easier to clean than the standard medical shields, which are made for single use. It didn’t take long for orders to start coming in.

Pneuhaus has become an integral part of New England PPE, a group of artists in the Providence community banding together to alleviate the desperate need for medical equipment. The project was spearheaded by Jungil Hong, a local textile artist. Hong started to organize other members of the local artistic community to sew masks in the very early days of the pandemic. Since then, the group has provided more than 9,000 face shields, 950 K95 masks, 500 community-sewn masks and 200 surgical masks to 13 states.

“At first it was just our network, but the demand grew very, very quickly,” said Muller. New England PPE primarily provides to small clinics that are struggling to protect their healthcare providers. “A lot of providers we’re talking to have big orders that are supposed to come in, but they need this now. So we just started making as many as we could, as fast as we could.”

At Pneuhaus, Muller and co-founder Levi Bedall have been working seven days a week. Their partners come in the afternoon to help with fulfillment. With the pandemic raging, the pressure is on. “This is like the final week of a project build, every day.” Yet in spite of shifting and difficult-to-predict conditions, and in spite of supply chain difficulties, these artists have managed to fulfill a crucial need.

Hong emphasized how critical the community response has been for New England PPE: “We are just three people directly working on this, but none of this would be possible without the community support and healthcare providers.” The group continues to raise donations, which go directly toward the production of PPE. You can find out more about their work, and donate, at newenglandppe.com