

Health**From guitar accessories to medical gear, a start-up pivots to a new era**

Thalia is one of a number of US companies retooling to fill shortages of coronavirus equipment



A Thalia employee making an 'intubation box' © Thalia

Patrick McGee in San Francisco APRIL 6 2020

On the final day that non-essential businesses were allowed to operate in the Bay Area last month, Chris Bradley let his hourly-paid staff work until midnight so they could earn overtime. Then he laid them all off.

“I had no choice because I wasn't sure if we were going to survive,” said Mr Bradley, head of Thalia, a Kickstarter project he founded in 2014 that uses high-tech lasers to cut rare wood into guitar accessories and phone cases.

Just weeks later, everyone on his 12-person production team has been offered their job back, with one significant adjustment — Thalia is now an “[essential](#)” business making medical gear for the fight against Covid-19.

Mr Bradley believes Thalia now has the potential to create greater revenue during the crisis than before it. “We can emerge from this stronger than we went into it,” he said.

The company is one of several US companies retooling to manufacture equipment to fight coronavirus. These range from carmakers [GM](#) and Ford churning out ventilators, to producers of [hoodies and T-shirts](#) that are switching to face masks. But few have gone from dead to shipping new product into hospitals in just three weeks.



An Intubation box sits over a patient's head and help to protect medical staff from infection © Thalia

Thalia's turnaround began when Mr Bradley sounded out friends on how his niche manufacturing expertise could be put into service during the coronavirus outbreak. One of them — Gary Tamkin, a physician who oversees 30 emergency departments — showed him a product that had only emerged weeks before in China: an “intubation box” that sits over a patient's head so that tubes can be inserted into the mouth while keeping medical staff safe.

“I basically sent Chris a picture of one of these boxes,” Dr Tamkin said. “Can you make these?” I asked. ‘Frickin' eh I can make these! Absolutely,’ he said.”

Designs for the boxes were readily available on the web, and Mr Bradley produced a few with his existing machines. On day one, last Wednesday, a team of three built 25 units. By this week he will be making 200 a day and he soon plans to make 400 a day.

Thalia has been able to shift its production faster than a company a hundred times its size. While Ford and GM are today at the prototype stage of ventilator production, “Thalia boxes” are already in use at a major hospital in Merced, California.

The boxes cost \$175 each, but Thalia is making them free for many hospitals © Thalia

“Thalia, while they're not on the New York Stock Exchange . . . their ability to crank these things out is an exponential ability,” said Dr Tamkin, who on Saturday held a call with the American College of Emergency Physicians of California, a non-profit he once led, to form a partnership and expedite the boxes to all 450 acute healthcare centres in the state.

The boxes cost \$175 each, but Mr Bradley is making them free for many hospitals thanks to a [GoFundMe](#) campaign that raised \$26,000 in less than 24 hours.

“Ideally you’d want one of these in your emergency room, another in your operating room, and another in your intensive care unit,” Dr Tamkin said.

For Thalia’s employees, the start-up’s reinvention is a lifeline while much of the state is shut down. The day it was closed, March 16, Chris Bean had taken the day off to celebrate his first wedding anniversary.

He had been with the company for nine months, making apparel and custom wood picks. When he filed for unemployment benefits, the prospects of being hired elsewhere soon looked dim. But now he is back at work, learning to bend acrylic glass.

“It’s even better that the thing I am doing is going to be helpful in some way,” he added. “Because I think the overwhelming feeling that a lot of people have right now is a feeling of helplessness.”

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