

Greenville Woodworkers Guild members include Tony Ryan (left), Dave Hancock (right), Merry Kuharsky and Russ Clarke (with drill). “Kaylee” (below), a beneficiary at the Meyer Center, loves her handmade school bus.

Professional and hobbyist crafters of the Greenville Woodworkers Guild labor for the love of their creations—and of children with special needs.

By Hannah Miller



Artisans With a Special Passion

The five woodworkers who came together as the Greenville Woodworkers Guild nearly 30 years ago couldn't have imagined how much good they'd do their city and its children. The original idea was to give themselves credibility and training while using their talents to help others who needed a chair, a cabinet—whatever their tools and talents could provide.

Today, the guild's 600-plus members have a 6,000-square-foot shop where they keep their high-end equipment running six days a week. Training classes are led by members and invited guests. Each year, they host a well-known woodworker—guests have included the late, famed Sam Maloof—in a public seminar.

But by far their biggest impact has been with the children.

PHOTO COURTESY THE MEYER CENTER



Since they “adopted” the Meyer Center for preschoolers with developmental disabilities shortly

after they organized, they've answered the call from some two dozen charities in need of bunk beds, playroom equipment and the like.

The woodworkers, says Meyer Center director Louise Anthony, have saved the center “hundreds of thousands of dollars. You can't go through one room here where they haven't done something.”

Since some children can't sit up in standard chairs and special-order chairs cost \$1,000 and up, the woodworkers met with a Meyer Center therapist and made 100 of their own design. Most children can use them, and for those who can't, “we'll make them whatever they need,” former shop manager Aubrey Rogers says.

At Christmas, they come bearing toys for each of the cen-



Art Welling, one of the guild organizers in 1981, recalls his first heartbreaking visit to the Meyer Center. Right: guild president Wayne Comstock, who remembers when the woodworkers “begged” for funding to support their charitable causes.

job. When president Comstock talks to new members now, he says, he discovers that probably 65 percent of them join in anticipation of being able to do woodworking during a future retirement. “It isn’t just a bunch of old coots like us,” he says of himself and the also-retired Rogers.

Professionals and hobbyists work side by side on the charitable projects in the shop/education center, part of a former warehouse made available by the family of member Bobby Hartness. They’re under the watchful eyes of 30 supervisors who staff the shop six days a week.

Neophytes like Merry Kuharsky feel welcome. Her membership was a Christmas gift from her husband. “I’d said for years I’d love to make simple furniture,” she explains, while working on cabinets for Habitat. She’s not to that level yet, she says, but she’s learning.

Welling cracks that it’s really Kuharsky and the other 35 to 40 women members who’re responsible for the guild’s success. “You know a bunch of men, they sit around and cuss and carve,” he says. “If you want something organized, sooner or later you have to get women involved in it.”

Other members point to the gift of shop space and its subsequent outfitting with professional equipment as a milestone in the guild’s growth. Once they had the space, the members immediately held a fundraiser—“begged,” as Comstock describes—for \$50,000. Then they bought the kind of equipment few woodworkers can

ter’s 100 children. The woodworkers patiently cut, glue and paint wooden airplanes, doll cradles, ducks that roll and “school buses” a child can ride on. “They are our everyday Santas,” Anthony says.

This year, 50 members are completely outfitting a Habitat House with cabinets—kitchen, bath, even a laundry room. Previously, they’ve made ramps so wheelchair users could get in and out of their homes easily. They’ve made bunk beds for the Palmetto Boys Shelter in Greenville, cabinets for the South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind in Spartanburg and outdoor play equipment for Greenville’s Safe Harbor shelter for victims of domestic violence. When parents come to Safe Harbor, explains Rogers, they bring their children with them.

In the past—“when we were a little poorer,” president Wayne Comstock says—they asked charities to pitch in something for the materials. Now, thanks to a \$15,000 grant from an anonymous donor, they can provide the materials free.

When woodworker Art Welling made that first organizing phone call in 1981, he wasn’t thinking only about charity. He was remembering the

struggle to gain credibility that he’d gone through eight years before when he entered the profession. “My problem was I was only 22 years old and happened to be a kind of baby-faced young guy, and everybody I talked to said, ‘No, we don’t think you have enough experience.’ I thought, well, woodworkers who are starting off and trying to learn the ropes need some sort of guild to attach their names to because that seems pretty important.”

He called another Greenville woodworking professional, Michael McDunn, whose early struggle was so painful “I don’t even like to look back on it,” he says now. The two got together with three hobbyist woodworkers, and the guild was born.

Welling and McDunn have gone on to professional success. Welling makes fine furniture at his The Traditionalist shop, and McDunn garners national recognition within the woodworking industry for the furniture he turns out at Michael McDunn Studio.

But most current members are like three of the other founders, W. Clayton Jackson, Robert T. Harvey and J.C. Thompson. Woodworking for them is a leisure-time pursuit rather than a full-time

afford on their own, like a \$5,000 planer and a \$2,000 saw.

Members are from Greenville as well as Hendersonville, Pickens, Easley, Anderson, Greenwood and Spartanburg.

Comstock credits the still-growing membership to the opportunity to do charitable work and the chance to learn. "People are always looking for ways to contribute but don't know how." At the guild, he says, "for \$75 a year, you get a double bang."

Its reputation has spread among woodworkers outside the state as it coaches other groups in organizing and setting up shops. It helped Alabama woodworkers establish an education center in an old schoolhouse. Comstock has been coaching a Washington, DC, woodworker on startup.

The Web site, www.greenvillewoodworkers.com, includes their entire, inch-thick shop manual outlining machine and safety procedures. They're constantly updating it, Rogers says, citing their experience with a sliding compound miter saw—"kind of a scary piece of equipment. Luckily, we never had an accident, but we were always having kickbacks [wood flying out of the machine]," he remembers. They tinkered with their procedure until the kickbacks stopped, and duly recorded the change.

The Web site, says Comstock, gets 200 hits a day from visitors as far away as England and Canada as well as the U.S.

In June, the guild received national recognition when the Sherwin-Williams' Minwax Interiors Stains and Varnishes Wood Finishings division gave it the 2009 Minwax Community Craftsman Award. The award recognizes outstanding community service through woodworking. It was presented, appropriately, at the



annual picnic and sawmilling outing, where part of the fun includes members cutting up their own logs at a member's shop in Greer.

In 2008, the nationally known guest invited to lead the public seminar was David Marks, host of the *Wood Works* show on the DIY TV channel. This past spring, it was Scott Phillips, host-producer of the long-running *American Woodshop* series on PBS. Three years ago, it was the 91-year-old Maloof, "probably the most famous woodworker in the U.S.," Rogers says. Maloof's sculptural and minimalist furniture had a profound effect on mid-20th-Century design. When he came to Greenville, he not only demonstrated how he made a chair; he took it home to finish it and sent back the completed chair. It's now in the guild's possession, waiting for future sale or auction.

The celebrities come and go, but it's the children of the Meyer Center and similar establishments who hold first place in the woodworkers' hearts. Welling remembers that first visit to the center in 1982, when the recently organized guild was shopping for a charity to adopt. A little girl, unable to walk, was getting around on a mechanic's dolly.

"I will never forget. Her name was Brandy. She looked up at me and smiled, and I thought, 'Oh, boy, get me out of here.'" It was a little more than he could handle, he says. "Three grown men went down to meet with them, and three men left with tears in their eyes." ❖

Charlotte freelance writer Hannah Miller has written about the return of bluebirds and bald eagles to the Palmetto State in previous issues.