



By Sandy Gregor

Community Woodturning

At a former dairy farm in Maine, a dedicated core of volunteers has created a woodturning program. Students give the instruction accolades for the consistent teaching delivered through the program's syllabus.

One of the students is an empty-nest mom who sanded 110 balusters in the shape of oar handles for her new house using a stack of sandpaper. She then decided she'd better begin to learn to turn.

There's the retiree who just likes to make things, and signed on after seeing what one of his neighbors could do with the lathe.

And who could overlook the new woodturner, who remarked on his class evaluation, "the best dollars I've spent since the purchase of my Harley."

Woodturning, according to a student beginning his second

course, "is easy to do. It's hard to do it well."

Whatever their reason for signing up, having the opportunity to learn this new skill in a systematic way—in a superbly equipped shop, under patient and experienced tutelage—is what is making the difference at the Round Top Center for the Arts woodturning program in Damariscotta, Maine.

Peter Asselyn, a professional turner who teaches in the program, noted that he had turned for two years before he even met another woodturner. If he'd had the kind of instruction that he and

other instructors provide to Round Top students, "I would have been five years ahead of where I am now, because those first two years were really crude. I wasted a lot of money buying tools I didn't need, and I'd have saved a lot of aggravation. I was fortunate I didn't have a bad accident."

Enthusiasm for a dream

No one at Round Top is getting rich teaching at \$25 an hour for four 3-hour sessions. Indeed, instructors often put in at least as many preparing hours as they teach, and Asselyn has over an hour's drive just to get to a class.

Left: Studio manager Ken Shepherd dgjldff gjg;dffglhdghghghkdghkdghkdgkdgkdf ggkdkfkfkfhjjkfkfkdgfgjsgfsfjsgghjsfg

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But he finds the teaching students to be inspirational.

"I'm pleased to be able to share what I have and pass it on, and see the looks on people's faces when I show them an easier way to do things," he said. But the main reason he was drawn into the experience was his admiration for program founder Ken Keoughan's "enthusiasm for a dream."

In an earlier life, Keoughan (pronounced *QUE-nun*), owned a successful Miami advertising business. He's a generous man, quick with his opinion, sometimes crusty, but filled with zest and enthusiasm at 70 years.

Keoughan looked around, and he wasn't satisfied the way turning was characteristically taught.

"All my instruction was with all-star turners, Keoughan said. "All-star turners come in with pet skills. Some are selling tools and some are selling techniques, but they're all selling something. That's not evil, it just isn't balanced, in my opinion."

His dream was a school that with a foundation based on a woodturning syllabus. Thus, the program could rely on the solid skills of experienced turners who could substitute for one another.

Turning teachers would know ahead of time what the course would teach, and how they would go about it in a step-by-step fashion, outlined in a syllabus.

Studio manager Ken Shepherd viewed some other teaching programs before the Round Top program began, and he thinks



Photos: David Higgins

the curriculum-based style gives the program great strength—especially by helping students "get into good habits in the first place."

Beginning students aren't allowed to take a bowl-turning course until they've had the prerequisites—two fundamental courses that give them a taste of bowls but also make them grapple with the skew chisel, learn beads and coves, and learn to turn with face shields and respect for the rules of safety.

Round Top students go home from almost every three-hour session with a completed project, which they find satisfying.

"I'm still a kid at heart. I like to take things home," said student Rick Palm, a retired businessman from nearby Cushing, who was especially proud of the egg cup he produced in the introductory turning course.

"The teachers go out of their way to make sure you have a feeling of success," adds student Doris Smith of Newcastle. "You come out of class feeling so big because your vessel is the best one that was ever made."

"The best dollars I've spent since the purchase of my Harley."

Acting on a passion

When he faced his retirement, Keoughan said he realized that to keep himself going, he would need to learn how to play, and find an activity that would engage him thoroughly.

"I went looking for something I would love to do, and I found passion," he said, after he was drawn into the craft by watching a sidewalk turner at a fair in Florida. In creating the school, he simply wants to share that passion.

Realizing the dream required a major commitment, both from Keoughan, who has what amounts to a part-time volunteer job running the school, and from the many other turners and supporters he drew into the project.

The Maine Woodturners, an AAW chapter, generously supported the program, helped move lathes, selected equipment, and set up the studio. Several are teachers and volunteers.

The teaching roster includes Asselyn, Bob Biette, Bob Hackett, Mark Irving, Peter McCrea, Mac Ray, Tom Raymond, studio manager Ken Shepherd and administrative assistant Ann Prescott (one of the first students).

Regional audience

The school aims at a local audience. Classes are affordable—\$115 for Round Top members, \$140 for non-members, plus a \$20 materials fee. All courses are offered in the daytime, in the evening, and on weekends. Although it's a great help if



students own a lathe and tools at home so they can practice their skills, they don't have to make a major investment before knowing if they like turning. Keoughan goal was to be able to tell beginning students, "All you have to do is to sign up and show up."

In the first year, the Round Top program included 25 classes that attracted 84 individuals (about a third of them women). Already, 18 students have gone on to enroll two or more courses.

One of the open questions is how much of a market Round Top can draw upon in coming years. Some of their students have been willing to travel an hour and a half to get there.

Each student works at his or her own identical workstation—each equipped with a Oneway 1640 lathe using and a standard set of well-sharpened tools.

Youth program added

Another program dream is to serve area youth and make a practical connection between the program and the community. This spring, the first cooperative effort between the Round Top program and the local high school, Lincoln



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Academy, will put six alternative education students in front of the lathes once a week for eight weeks, an achievement Keoughan is particularly proud of.

Although his job is to maintain equipment, Shepherd says the staff has worked to "fix *anything* that's broke," often responding to student feedback to add a course or alter something about how instructors implement techniques.

Ann Prescott turned this 7'-diameter bowl during a Master Bowls class at the Round Top Center for the Arts. "David Lancaster was my teacher and provided invaluable guidance in its creation." In the first year, Ann completed eight classes and now volunteers as an administrative assistant.

They learned, for instance, that students highly valued the input and availability of two instructors, but sometimes got confused because that also meant being shown two ways of doing things. Now, the assistants have become more sensitive to supporting the methods of the teacher in charge.

A more general problem is that the program doesn't get enough constructive criticism. The most common word both staff and students alike use to describe the program is "fun."

But then, it's no surprise to others in the field to learn that new students are walking out muttering, "I'm addicted."

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Can I create this in my community?

When Ken Keoughan put together the woodturning school in Damariscotta, Maine, he wanted it to be something that could be replicated by turners in other communities.

Although there were some special elements that come together to make the woodturning program at the Round Top Center for the Arts happen, they are none of them so unusual that motivated turners replicate this elsewhere. The model, of course, is non-profit, and designed as a community service rather than a business.

For questions, contact Ken at 207-832-6538 or kkeoughan@yahoo.com.

Here's what worked at Round Top.

The location and support

There was unused space in an outbuilding on the old dairy farm that forms the Center. Although the Center could offer no money to start up or support the program, it had the means to provide space and absorb utility costs. A restroom was in place on the premises and they could add a rider for the insurance coverage (which the turning program pays for) onto Round Top's policy.

The relationship is somewhat loose but important: Round Top also provides the administrative entity that sponsored the loan for the lathes, and they include the woodturning courses in their regular catalog, register the students, collect fees, and write the checks.

In return, Round Top receives any net proceeds over and above the costs of running the program. In the first year, that amounted to \$662, which is expected to increase this year as start-up costs drop off.

The right equipment

The purchase of six Oneway lathes was the program's biggest purchase. For this, they turned to the Maine Community Foundation for a \$10,000 loan. If all goes well, the loan should be paid off in 2007.

The Maine Woodturners, and an EOG funding were among other revenue sources.

The curriculum

Each course has a written syllabus covering tools, techniques, and projects, reviewed

and refined after each class. Beginning students are encouraged to invest in Keith Rowley's *Woodturning: A Foundation Course*. Keoughan wrote the early syllabus after consulting the instructors, and some of the instructors have written their own curricula for specialty courses. Because interest is rising,

Round Top expects to add more woodturning courses next year.

The best instructors

The program has nine instructors, all of them drawn from the Maine Woodturners. Students clearly bond with the instructors, using a lot of superlatives in their evaluations to describe them, praising their expertise, patience, and enthusiasm.

Some Round Top instructors volunteer additional time to assist classes when they are not the paid instructor.



Ken Shepherd, left, and Ken Keoughan

The program manager

Keoughan volunteers 20 to 30 hours a week managing the program, overseeing the finances, making purchases, welcoming classes and often assists the instructors.

The studio manager

Ken Shepherd volunteers two or three days a week to manage the studio. He makes sure all the blanks are prepared, wood is stacked, tools sharpened, and equipment working. He also assists in classes.

The administrative assistant

The program's star student, Ann Prescott of Bath, is so enthusiastic she has completed all eight courses and volunteers as administrative assistant. She makes sure copies of the syllabus are prepared for instructors and students at the beginning of the class. She also prepares press releases.

Ann has maintains a database of students and area woodturners for direct mail.

Bookkeeping

Keoughan's wife, Katharina (also a Round Top painting instructor), manages a separate bookkeeping system to track revenues and expenses for the turning program. This also gives Keoughan an independent assessment of the health of the program in case Round Top is unable to continue sponsoring the school in the future.

Meeting ongoing expenses

With the help of Mac Ray, one of the instructors, Keoughan found a local sawyer who supplies the wood at a reasonable cost. Teachers are paid, but none of the people who work on the other aspects of the school are paid. The tuition covers the \$300 instructor's fee, \$150/month insurance, the \$440/month loan payment for the lathes, and a net for Round Top Center for the Arts.

Marketing

Keoughan has made sure there are plenty of press releases about the programs offerings. (Tip: Know the local papers' deadlines, how they like to receive materials especially photos, and always include "woodturning" and the name of the program in the headline, he advises.)

He talks up the program everywhere. He's also offered a free course to employees of every hardware store and lumberyard in the area and the school's suppliers. "I've found out whenever I go out there and beat the bushes, something good happens though often the result is indirect," he says.

The ongoing health of the program

Because the program depends so much on volunteers, they've also begun thinking about how they can begin to cultivate assistants to pass the mantle on to in the future. "Students will become assistants, assistants will become instructors. We will also continue to expand on course offerings—spindle turning, architectural turning, embellishing and designing.

"What we are striving to build is a community of woodturners in our area."

—Sandy Gregor