

The Joys of Woodworking

By Fran Miller



Diablo Woodworkers founder and "head woodchuck" Bill Tarleton and his wife, and webmaster, Erlene with an example of some of the toys the Club makes and donates to local organizations.

When Lafayette resident Bill Tarleton couldn't find a local club where he and other woodworking enthusiasts could share interests, he decided to start his own. The self-described "head woodchuck" of the Diablo Woodworkers club (DW) began organizing monthly meetings in 1996, where a handful of hobbyists would meet via word-of-mouth in member garages. Now, 13 years later, DW boasts a membership of 330 and communicates with its members via a highly informative website, designed and overseen by Tarleton's wife Erlene. Monthly meetings have moved beyond carports to the Pleasant Hill Adult Education Center. Offering a plethora of guest speakers, seminars, specialized instruction, and woodworking competitions, DW has become Diablo Valley's go-to source for all things woodshop. Members range from beginner to professional and include cabinetmakers, scroll saw artists and wood turners.

Robert Barnett, an 11-year club member, has been the guest speaker coordinator for the past eight years and in that time and has personally brought in nearly 60 local artists who have gladly and willingly shared their art with club members. He scours newspaper and magazine articles for possible guests and artisans of interest. "Our members are generally interested in a speaker's woodworking philosophy, their working techniques, and what inspires them to make a particular object," says Barnett. "We have had great presentations from folks that make ukuleles, puzzles, violins, boats and even a sitar maker. We have also had presentations on environmental tree issues and sustainable wood resources." DW also offers woodshop instruction through special seminars entitled "saw dust sessions," held Saturday mornings in a member's home woodshop, focusing on narrowly defined subjects and taught by professionals and experts in a particular field, such as PBS television personality Roy Underhill of "The Woodwright Shop." Examples of recent seminars include: building a child's rocking chair, fundamentals of box making, wood finishing, and marquetry.

Overseeing these “saw dust sessions” is Jeff Traeger, a DW member for the past 12 years. “My skills were first learned as a young person in school, and that school experience turned into a hobby that I have pursued most of my adult life,” says Traeger. “I have honed my skills by taking DW woodworking classes and seminars as well as learning from my fellow DW members.”

DW welcomes men and women, young and old. The club’s youngest member is 18-year-old Concord resident Daniel Lindholm who was introduced to the club during high school, when he attended a demonstration by Bill Tarleton at the Clayton Community Library. Lindholm values the experience and knowledge offered by the club. “The presenters at DW meetings almost always bring new things for me to learn about, or at least some new fact of interest,” says Lindholm, who, like most members, works out of a woodshop in his garage. “And, they have sub-groups for the lathe workers, the turners, which is my primary art. I enjoy the knowledge base and I can ask questions. And I enjoy the diversity and ease of access to the different fields of woodworking within the group.”

While the club provides much to its members, they in turn give much back to the community, providing endless volunteer hours for a number of causes throughout the area. Hundreds of toys are designed and built annually for donation to organizations such as the Monument Crises Center; flag cases are built and provided to families who have lost loved ones in service; display cabinets were built for the jury room at the Martinez court house, and nearly 1,000 volunteer hours were recorded in refurbishing Ygnacio Valley High School’s 40-year-old woodshop. “Diablo Woodworkers club members took a barely functioning shop and made it into a clean, professional looking classroom,” said the high school’s industrial arts instructor Terry Toliver. “But more importantly, my students learned about work ethic, and what it means to help out in the community. These woodworkers, most of whom are retired from other professions, came in and taught my students about hard work and a job well done. That lesson is priceless.”

DW also supports and encourages young woodworkers in the Contra Costa community with its annual High School Woodworking Competition, where club members judge projects made by local high school students. Awards, such as gift certificates to woodworking stores, are provided to winners. This coming year, the annual competition will be expanded to include middle school students and adults, as DW is combining efforts with the Contra Costa County Fair woodworking competition, to be held June 4 – 6, 2010, a win-win that will increase participation and DW’s visibility, and allow for an expanded prize structure. Overseeing the student competition committee is Alan Coyle, a three-year member of DW. “Combining our competition with the Fair’s competition is beneficial to both groups. We can take advantage of their in-place processes, and in turn, offer our processes of contacting schools,” says Coyle. “We also supply knowledgeable and experienced judges.”

Membership in DW is free, though an occasional can is passed at meetings to cover various expenses such as speakers, awards and supplies. “While club members gather primarily to share woodworking projects and ideas, we are at heart a philanthropic bunch,” says Tarleton. “Our members love using their skills and knowledge to assist others. From making toys for needy children, to sharing a particular expertise with a high school woodworking class, we jump at the chance to share our love of woodworking.”

Liz Summer-Reid was the 2009 3rd place *winner in the Large Projects division for the canoe she submitted to the High School Woodworking Competition held by Diablo Woodworkers.*



Diablo Woodworkers meet the second Wednesday of each month, 7 – 9 pm at the Pleasant Hill Education Center Woodshop, One Santa Barbara Rd., Room 112, Pleasant Hill. All are welcome. For more information visit www.diablowoodworkers.com.