

A Higher Calling: Alan Young

by Earl Stresak

Long before he refined his wood-working skills, Alan Young determined that someday people would seek him out as a furniture maker. His years of persistent attention to his craft and his confidence in himself are paying off – significantly.

“Right now, one-third of my income comes from my woodworking and I suppose I’m at the point where I could do this for a living,” Young says. His full-time job is working as an engineering technician at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he runs a machine shop building parts for the department of radiation oncology’s imaging equipment.

Nights and weekends, he trades shop aprons to work at his home-based woodshop.

“I guess I crossed the line somewhere in the last year to where woodworking is not just a hobby, it’s part of my income. I have to schedule things like a business. I try to work in the evenings two or three nights a week, at least a few hours after I spend time with the family,” he says.

As a woodworker, Young’s forte has been to create one-of-a-kind, functional furniture. When speaking about his work, he often mentions the importance of building furniture that’s not only pleasing to the eye, but also something that “works.”

“Everything I’ve built hasn’t been available someplace else,” he says.

“Otherwise, I figure either I, or my client, could just go to a store and buy it.”

Young’s Web site, woodwardwoodworks.com, serves as a furniture maker’s portfolio. The mix of work displayed there is eclectic, and a testimony to his fearlessness in taking on any woodworking challenge a client might bring.

Pieces on his site include a woodworker’s usual list of suspects — beds, tables, chairs, cabinets, an armoire and a hutch, all of them elegant custom-built pieces. There’s also the not-so-common, such as music stands and even dental cabinets.

His work includes liturgical furniture like the rich dark-wood pieces made for the chapel of a Michigan retirement home. Titled “Light over Darkness,” the design grouping consists of an altar table made of cherry and walnut accented by a starburst of walnut and maple which looks as though it is floating underneath. On the center of the altar top is a walnut and mahogany cross, fashioned in an Old World iconoclastic design. Near the altar is a walnut and mahogany lectern that emits light from its base.

Crossing the line

The Ypsilanti, Mich., woodworker says it has taken him a decade to fulfill his expectations for himself. “Ten years ago, I had the vision and confidence inside of me to believe in what I could eventually do,” Young says of his woodworking. Of course, the skills needed to create his body of work didn’t develop overnight.

Born and raised in Grand Forks, N.D., Young graduated from North Dakota State University in Fargo with a degree in music education. While at college he worked part-time at the on-campus National Public Radio affiliate. After graduation he worked for NPR in Muskegon and Ann Arbor as a classical-music producer and recording engineer. “I’d go out to local events, drag my microphones and tape recorders, tape record them and produce them for



Young’s creations include common furniture items such as beds, tables and cabinets, but also rarer items such as music stands, dental cabinets and church altars. Photo by Santa Fabio/Redux Plus



This red oak and walnut buffet was designed to match an existing table in the Young home. Photo by Alan Young



Remaining true to his love for the use of contrasting woods, Young’s current project is a media cabinet crafted in red oak and walnut. Photo by Santa Fabio/Redux Plus

local broadcast." He would then fill in or host an on-air show. He did that for 15 years.

Young and his wife, Eileen, have three children: a married daughter, Melissande, 23, and sons O'Neill and Spencer, ages 18 and 15. Eileen teaches music at a local school, serves as a church musician and gives private piano lessons.

The family lived in a small townhouse. When Eileen spotted some wood scraps going to waste, she had an idea how to put them to good seasonal use.

"My wife asked me to make a birdhouse," Young recalls of his first foray into woodworking. "Easter was coming up, so she wanted an Easter decoration."

Building in his blood

Shop work was in Young's blood, if not exactly wood shop.

His grandfather was a millwright for the North Dakota State Mill, while his father founded Telpro Inc., a company that builds construction equipment. (His father and brothers Dana and Larry still run the company.) His father also invented a product called the PanelLift Drywall, a device that facilitates handling of drywall sheets during construction.

Through high school and college, Young worked at his father's machine shop, welding, painting and doing a variety of machine chores.

"So, I figured that building a birdhouse was something I should have been able to do," he says, but it wasn't so easy. "They kept falling apart." Seeing his father's struggle, his oldest son – then only four – observed, "Dad, wouldn't it work better if you clamped it together?"

Days later, Young shared the story about his first woodworking experience with his twin brother. Listening to the stories of Young's frustrating attempts to build the birdhouse, his brother gave him \$100 worth of basic hand tools. The kind gesture started Young down a new path of woodworking fulfillment.

Despite the shortage of free space in the family townhouse, Young managed to appropriate a small workspace in the basement next to the laundry. He acquired a drill press that had belonged to his grandfather, then bought a router.

"I picked up a small Taiwan-import bench-top table saw. I'd run my router and get sawdust and shavings all over the dirty laundry pile." Young laughs as he recalls shaking out shavings from dirty socks, shirts and trousers.

Young's venture into the world of woodworking had begun, even though the family budget didn't leave much to buy wood. During that time, Young was trying to make a little extra income by running a newspaper delivery route.

"I'd get up at three in the morning," he says. "If people had thrown out stuff, I'd scavenge tables or leftover pieces of wood, anything I could find. That's what I would bring home to practice on."

Besides his trial-and-error early attempts, he also began to absorb woodworking knowledge wherever he could find it. "I did the sort of thing other people would do," he says. "I'd read magazines, watch Public TV shows like Norm Abram, that type of thing. I'd watch someone else do something. I'd get the bug for it. I'd think, that looks interesting; I could do that. Then you think, I need some tools, I need some space.

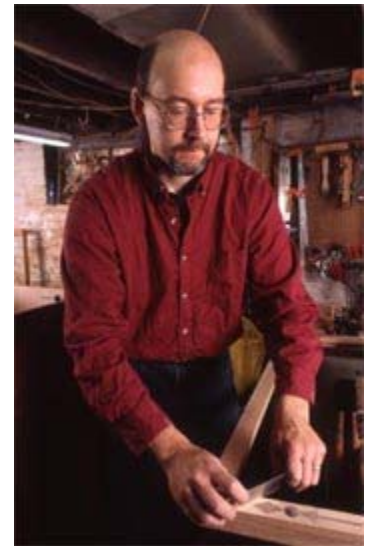
"My wife put up with it, but we were fortunate to be able to move within a



This nightstand was designed to complete an existing bedroom set. Photo by Alan Young



Young describes the style of this desk and chair as "modified mission." They're built of red oak with walnut details. Photo by Alan Young



Adding touched like inlays is one of Young's trademarks. Photo by Santa Fabio/Redux Plus

year of my getting bit by this bug," he says.

His present shop

The Young family moved into "a big old house" that has a basement, and where, 14 years later, he still has his shop. Young took half of the basement area to create a shop measuring slightly over 12" x 27". While the new space proved a great improvement over the laundry shop in the townhouse, it still posed a logistical challenge.

"There is enough space to grow and get some machines in there," he explains. "But by the time you start building things, it gets a little crowded." He periodically has to move larger pieces outside for final assembly, a task he accomplishes with the help of a design quirk of the old house.

"From the basement there is a door. You open up the door, and there is a set of steps that go up to the outside. But, those steps are covered by a deck. The previous owner had built a removable section of the deck. There is a set of removable deck boards that I cleated together. I go outside, remove that section of the deck. It takes about four minutes."

Young works in stages on his projects. For example, he might be staining one part of a project while cutting and milling another. Because his projects have grown in size and number, efficient work flow has become an issue, so he's contemplating a larger space. His property contains an old barn that would be perfect, but its condition would require extensive — and expensive — renovation.

"It's a major piece of work by itself," he says of the structure, which contains neither wiring nor insulation.

His shop includes a Grizzly contractor table saw with a router table mounted on the extension table. He says he's used the router table maybe twice, "so I'm not sure it turned out that efficient." Shop equipment also includes a Jet mortiser; Bosch 2-hp plunge router; Delta 10" sliding miter saw; a pair of small drill presses; Grizzly 14" bandsaw and 6" jointer; DeWalt DW733 12" planer; and a series of hand tools.

"It's not an overwhelmingly equipped shop, but I can get every job done that I have to do."

Young says he sometimes has to improvise setups, not because of his tooling, but because of space constraints in his basement. As a result, most of his machines are on casters so he can move them around.

"I try to mill up as much of the pieces in advance as I can, so that I'm not milling, assembling, milling, assembling, that sort of thing; and also because I just start running out of space to cut a long board."

After years of working with what he calls poor lighting, he recently installed a set of halogen spotlights. "In some ways they have been working out better than the shop lights," Young says, referring to his 4" fluorescents. "They seem to cover enough space."

The ceiling of his shop is open rafters with the lowest area about 7" high — sometimes a tight squeeze whenever the 6'3" woodworker has to negotiate around furnace ductwork.

Although the furnace is located in the basement and ducted into his shop area, winters can prove a bit chilly.

Professional considerations



Young's home, built in 1895, includes this carriage house, which he plans to convert into his new shop. Photo by Santa Fabio/Redux Plus.



This music stand that Young built is one of his personal favorites.



The "M&G" bed was a wedding gift for Young's daughter Melissande and her husband Greg.

Although his work is professional, Young initially suffered through a frustrating period convincing prospective clients to hire him as a furniture maker.

“How do you tell somebody – when you have one small router, a bench-top table saw, a few hand clamps, a hammer and a hand drill – that you can make fine furniture?” he says.

Young quickly found that it paid off to promote himself by carrying around photos of his work wherever he went. “I was like a grandfather showing pictures of his grandchildren,” he says.

Like others before him, Young built his share of gifts and donations in order to build a woodworking portfolio.

“I made a music stand that is the only one like it I’ve made, and it’s one of my favorite pieces. I don’t know if I’ll ever make another one,” he says. “It’s one that I didn’t get paid for and I’m very proud of it. If you are an amateur woodworker, or don’t do it for a living, that is always the satisfaction you get out of your work,” he says. Now, with a growing client base, he has honed his pre-production marketing procedure. Most of his business comes from his Web site. When a prospective client contacts him, they will come up with a generally agreed-upon design, then Young quotes a price. He requires one-third of the project cost as a down payment, then collects the balance when it’s completed.

With his client base growing, will Young make the leap to full-time woodworker?

“This is a burning question every week,” Young says, but he feels he may go another eight or nine years at his university job to fulfill retirement qualifications. Besides, he really enjoys his job; although he creates metal and plastic projects, he finds the work similar to that in his woodshop.

“Yet, looking at the net receipts of what I’ve made, one could argue that I’d be better off leaving right now.”

But Young also wonders if the passion and joy that his woodworking now brings him might fade if pressed to increase his creative production.

Woodworking philosophy

After over a decade at his craft, what woodworking lessons has the Michigan furniture maker learned? While working as a recording engineer Young picked up something he believes carries harmoniously into woodworking.

“The fellow who taught me how to record an orchestra, choir or group of musicians told me that less is more. Just because you have an 85-piece orchestra doesn’t mean you need 25 microphones. The most subtle [setup] will give the most subtle sound,” Young says. But he admits that the wisdom didn’t immediately click with him when it came to his furniture making. “I think I’ve had a hard time learning that in my woodworking. The thought that you can put maple, cherry, and walnut all in one piece sounds really fun and exciting, but it can get rather confusing.”

Young is more comfortable now exhibiting understatement in his work, but still gets satisfaction from his creations that are accented using more than one type of wood. He says he sometimes tires of furniture made of only one type of wood. “It’s a very subjective reaction I have to furniture. My eye enjoys seeing the contrast.”

Young is trying to express that concept in his work by exploring different

shapes, forms and textures.

A friend of Young's — also a furniture maker — said something once that has stuck in his mind, becoming a sort of mentoring affirmation and challenge. The man had observed that a woodworker can spend years "wandering around in the design forest." Young never forgot that.

"What he meant was finding some way to distinguish yourself from every great furniture maker out there, or wannabe furniture maker out there. To get there, you have to spend years wandering around in the design forest.

"I think I am still very much wandering around and really enjoying getting lost. But, at some point I have to start focusing on what is it that I do that is special. I don't think I've answered that question yet."