

Andi Sullivan's Growing Legacy

Andi Sullivan is perhaps the most unlikely woodturner you will ever meet. "I am not the best woodturner, but I really love it. By all accounts, I shouldn't even be here," she says of the physical challenges she has endured. In addition to a genetic condition called cornea dystrophy, she has survived three strokes—the last one rendering her blind—and lives with a heart condition and lupus. "After the first stroke, I couldn't walk and they told me I would never walk again. But I went in the pool every single day and rehabbed until I could walk," says Andi, who has been blind for fifteen years and found a renewed sense of purpose in her life through the rewards of sharing with others what has made all the difference for her—woodturning.

And share it she does, with incredible energy and a sense of determination that can only be called inspiring. "My momma said 'No' was never an option," she notes.

History

Andi's life-changing entry into woodturning began in 2010, when she attended AAW's international symposium in Hartford, Connecticut, with her husband Allen. As she and Allen passed through the Instant Gallery, he described the various turnings to her verbally, as no touching of the items is allowed. Malcolm Zander, an experienced woodturner, happened to witness the two as they perused the gallery. Malcolm decided verbal descriptions were not enough to convey an appreciation for the woodturned items on display and approached with one of his own turnings for Andi to examine by touch. The experience left a lasting impression on Andi, who was inspired to learn woodturning herself.

Allen and Andi later contacted Kurt Hertzog and inquired about a class he would be teaching that year at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts.



At the AAW symposium in Phoenix, 2014, blind woodturner Andi Sullivan explains pen turning to Frank Vance, who is also blind.

Photo: Andi Wolfe

Although Kurt had never taught a blind student, he agreed to give it a try. Arrowmont had never had a blind student in their woodturning program, but Allen and Andi persisted and the school accepted Andi into its program.

Andi's first one-week woodturning class was a success, and she has been taking classes at Arrowmont every year since then. "The first year, everyone came by to see if I was going to leave with all my fingers," she recalls. "Now they see me as a woodturner and not just as a blind person. And that is the biggest compliment anyone could give me—to allow me to become part of the woodwork, in a good way, and accept me for something beyond my disability. Arrowmont has done that."

Success in Tampa

With a newfound sense of purpose and confidence, Andi chaired a panel discussion in 2013 at the Tampa symposium called Turners with Disabilities. Prior to the symposium, Malcolm had worked with Andi and the local

LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired to spread the word and encourage others to attend.

Inspired to share her joy of woodturning, Andi had also approached LightHouse of Tampa with a plan to teach woodturning to the blind and visually impaired. You can imagine the apprehension this proposal must have caused—a blind woman teaching blind students how to turn wood. With persistence, she won them over and so began a pilot program that included a panel discussion for the blind and other challenged turners; a symposium tour and touching event for LightHouse members; turning demonstrations by Andi and other panel members; a pen-turning session for the blind; and permission to begin a woodturning program as part of the Tampa LightHouse. With assistance from Chelsea Bridges, Activities Director for the Tampa LightHouse, Andi created the first woodturning program in the entire LightHouse organization.

With support from several woodturning vendors, the new Tampa LightHouse woodturning program began with a lathe, tools, mandrels, and supplies for not only teaching the craft but also producing salable items that could help support the program in the future. Andi, Allen, and Andi's father continue to teach at the Tampa LightHouse regularly, and they have trained Chelsea as an instructor, too. The program has expanded and now has a second lathe to accommodate additional students.

An expanding legacy

Andi decided the success of the Tampa program could be applied elsewhere, and she developed a plan to establish a self-sustaining woodturning program for the blind in each AAW symposium city. Her goal for each symposium is to

host a panel discussion, hold the visits and turning events for the blind and visually impaired, and work with the local LightHouse or other organizations to add woodturning as a regular, ongoing offering.

This model worked beautifully in 2014 at the Phoenix symposium. As a result of Andi's leadership there, the Arizona Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ACBVI) has established a woodturning program that has grown exponentially. In just the first three months of 2015, thirty students had benefitted from the program, which had a four-month waitlist. Sharon Wertz, one of the lead woodturning instructors at ACBVI, has taught others to teach woodturning and has successfully publicized the program through, among other venues, the online forum of the International Association of Penturners (penturners.org).

To continue expanding her woodturning legacy, Andi begins planning for the following year during the week after the current symposium, and her efforts to make it happen take place over the course of the year. Having succeeded in Tampa and the following year in Phoenix, Andi has made plans and preparations for Pittsburgh. "The moment we get done setting up our program for the Pittsburgh symposium, I will be calling Atlanta," she says.

Andi admits determination is not easy to maintain. "There are times when I feel sad," she explains. "When you are disabled, your life is so different and you just want to be the same. Sometimes I feel mad because I want to get in my car and drive places. I



Frank Vance turns a bottle opener handle. Long after the AAW symposium in Phoenix, the woodturning program at the Arizona Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired will continue.

Photo: Sharon Wertz/ACBVI



ACBVI instructor Tom Beatty (left) instructs Richard Cuprak, who suffers from macular degeneration.

Photo: ACBVI



Sharon Wertz (right) instructing Justine Williams at the ACBVI, Phoenix.

Photo: ACBVI



Pens expertly made by Andi Sullivan.

Photo: Kurt Hertzog

want to do everything myself. But I don't give up hope. I just find another way." This cycle plays out in Andi's woodturning, which presents a series of challenges that, when met, lead to a significant sense of empowerment.

"I'm so thankful every time I go to the Tampa school because there are people there who feel the way I did when I turned my first pen. You go home with something tangible that you made that you probably didn't think you could ever do. And you

think, 'Life is going to go on because I just made this pen.' If I can help others to feel that way so they can have hope, then my purpose here will be complete," Andi says.

Supporting the cause

Ongoing support from several woodturning manufacturers and vendors has been key to implementing a turning facility at each symposium host city. Powermatic/JET, Penn State Industries, Crown Tools, Easy Wood Tools, Teknatool, Woodcraft, Arizona Silhouette, and many anonymous donors have generously supported Andi's initiatives. Andi says her next goal is to attract a large corporate sponsor to further back the implementation of woodturning programs for the blind and visually impaired. ▶

Andi developed a plan to establish a self-sustaining woodturning program for the blind in each AAW symposium city.

Andi's husband, Allen, has also provided tremendous support for Andi and spends long hours preparing pen blanks for use by the Tampa group.

At the Pittsburgh symposium's Instant Gallery, pens and other items made by blind and visually impaired woodturners in the Tampa and Phoenix programs will be on display and for sale. Proceeds will go toward purchasing supplies for these two chapters' activities. Symposium attendees can support Andi's efforts by buying one or more of these pens.

Woodturning blind

Andi has become an accomplished woodturner, though her techniques by necessity are different than those of sighted turners. She has developed her own technique that allows her to turn, sand, and finish her work safely and with wonderful results.

"I often use the Easy Wood tools because they are pretty forgiving," she explains. "These tools are kept flat on the toolrest, so you automatically know that aspect of your orientation. I put tape on either end of the toolrest so I'll know how far I can go."

Since Andi needs to feel her progress rather than see it, her methods

require her to turn the lathe on and off frequently. "I've blown out a lot of switches because I do that so much," she says, laughing. Andi relies on pen bushings to indicate when she has reached the end of the workpiece. "I wear those down, too," she says. "When you feel the tool on the bushing, you know to go back the other way. And that is how we teach blind people to turn. Plus, I keep my lathe slower because I feel like I have better control."

"I'm always trying to push my own skills so I can continue teaching more to my students," Andi says. She is able to use gouges and other tools beyond those designed for scraping. In addition to pens, Andi turns lidded boxes, jewelry, and other projects, some of which she has taught in the Tampa LightHouse program.

As for materials, Andi has worked with acrylics and wood, as well as her own cast pen blanks. "I enjoy turning any material, but I love the feel of wood," she confides. "I like the smell of it and the different densities you can sense while turning it."

The turned item that started it all—the one Malcolm Zander encouraged Andi



Despite serious physical challenges, Andi Sullivan (right) has flourished as a woodturner and instructor, pictured here teaching Jan Zander to turn her first pen. Andi works ambitiously to share woodturning as a means of providing hope for others.

Photo: Malcolm Zander

to "see" with her hands in the Instant Gallery—continues to inspire Andi. Malcolm later gave the piece to her, and now she touches it every day in gratitude for their serendipitous meeting and his simple, kind gesture that day in Hartford. "Who would have thought that one little touch of a piece of wood could have started all this?" she muses. ■

—Joshua Friend

Special thanks to Kurt Hertzog for his valuable contributions to this article.

Northern Illinois Woodturners Holds Turnathon

The Northern Illinois Woodturners held its second annual Turnathon in February 2015 at Auburn High School in Rockford, Illinois. Chapter members were joined by the Junior ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) detachment from Auburn High School and several members of the local VietNow chapter. VietNow is an organization devoted to helping U.S. veterans (vietnow.com). The group turned approximately 255 pens for military personnel serving in various capacities around the world.

Fourteen lathes were in action under the direction of Terry Brown, Chapter

President; Dave Alfredson, Freedom Pen Coordinator; and John Basque, an Auburn faculty member and club member. The connection between the chapter and the Auburn faculty has contributed to the addition of four lathes to the high school woodshop. Members also provided instruction to the ROTC students, who created pens of their own design. The Rockford chapter of VietNow had four members turning and assisting. ■

—Terry Brown



Members of the Auburn High School ROTC learn woodturning while making pens for military personnel.