



Photo: Tim Snyder

# Dale Larson

## 2019 AAW HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBER

Malcolm Zander

*The AAW Board of Directors at its discretion confers honorary lifetime membership to persons who, in its judgement, have made extraordinary contributions to the American Association of Woodturners and the advancement of woodturning.*

Around 2002 a car chase was filmed from a helicopter by a KGW Portland TV news crew. The stolen car weaved and dodged through a series of red lights and then came to an intersection where a police officer stood. He threw spike strips under the car, which swerved and struck the officer on the leg, throwing him into the air. The car careened onwards, but in a couple of miles, tires shredded, it ground to a halt on its rims. The pursuit cruisers closed in. Seven of them surrounded the car and the fugitive got out and surrendered.

Fortunately the police officer was not seriously hurt. His name was Dale Larson, future AAW President and 2019 Honorary Lifetime Member.

### Early days

Dale started out on a farm in North Dakota and grew up in an old logging town in Washington from the time he was in second grade. His father was a beef farmer who worked in construction to pay the bills. As a small child, Dale read many books. It was his way of traveling around the world and learning about it. He still loves to read, and outside of woodturning it is his favorite activity. He prefers non-fiction and is very well informed and interested in history and global affairs.

In Dale's junior year in high school, he decided to become a state trooper, so he enrolled at Washington State University and took a bachelor's degree in police science. In 1973, in his senior year, having completed all the required courses, he took other classes that interested him from all over the university, including one in industrial arts (woodworking), during which he was required to make a bookcase, a footstool, and a turned bowl. As Dale recalls, "I took my drawing of my proposed bookcase to the professor. He looked at my drawing and said it looked like a farmer drew it. In fact, that is exactly who drew it, a farmer. It was easy to make and fit the requirements exactly but had no style.



Dale teaching at the Carolina Mountain Woodturners, March 2011.

Photo: Tina Collison



Salad Bowl Set, 2010, Pacific madrone, largest: 5" x 12½" (13cm x 32cm)

This set has been used one to two times per week for nine years and still looks new. Great form and spectacular figure.

Photo: Malcolm Zander

He showed me how to modify my idea to add some nice lines."

The required bowl was turned with scrapers, and sanding began with 50-grit garnet. It received a grade of A-. The bowl has green felt on the bottom. Dale has an extensive collection of turnings from artist friends worldwide; it includes this first bowl.

Following graduation, Dale landed a job with the Washington State Patrol. He thought that a further qualification would make him a better policeman, so he worked the night shift and went back to school in the daytime. After nine straight quarters, he graduated with a master's degree in research psychology from Central Washington University in 1978. Dale Larson does not do things by half measures. His police career lasted thirty years, from 1974 to 2004. Most of it was with Multnomah County and the City of Portland, dealing with methamphetamine labs and criminals. Not a job for the faint-hearted.

In 1978, Dale bought a 1/2-horsepower Craftsman lathe from a Sears catalog. The turning tools were scrapers and spindle gouges, so he turned bowls with these, as he did not know any other way. Then in 1989, he learned of the third AAW Symposium in Seattle. He had never met another woodturner and thought it would be interesting: "I bought my first Nova chuck there. I watched Wally Dickerman turning a bowl and Jack Straka using

power sanding. I learned things at the Symposium from Wally and Jack that I still use today. I also took two woodturning classes that year, where I saw a bowl gouge for the first time. I started selling my bowls in 1991. I turn bowls because of where I grew up. I grew up on a farm and things had to be practical."

### On the AAW Board of Directors

In 2009, Dale was elected to the AAW Board. He arrived, unawares, at a critical time. After the 2008 crash and recession, the AAW contracts had obligations that could be met only in a pre-recession economy. Dale, no stranger to stressful situations, led the cancellation and

restructuring of the contracts to fulfill commitments the AAW could meet. He successfully led a fundraising campaign to cover unavoidable losses, and he identified legal and financial expertise within the AAW to assist. The finance committee was reinvigorated with a powerful team of experienced businesspeople, and with their advice and the financial skills of Executive Director Phil McDonald, hired in 2012, the AAW was restored to financial health and continues to build its reserves.

Dale served as Symposium Chair in 2010–2011 and returned to the AAW Board in 2012 for a second term. His fellow directors elected him President. It was the proudest moment of his life, and for the next three years, he gave full value. He brought professional leadership to the AAW office, developed Turners Without Borders, and over four years reviewed, revised, and rewrote all the AAW policies, procedures, committees, and programs. He led the committee that rewrote the bylaws (a major project) and obtained approval of the changes by a vote of the general membership. All this material he gathered into a single Handbook document, invaluable to every new and current Board member. The AAW operations are now all codified and no longer need to be reinvented by each incoming new Board. ▶



Dale at the lathe.



Oval Bowl, Pacific madrone, 3¼" × 15" × 10½" (8cm × 38cm × 27cm)

Dale is one of very few turners who regularly turn oval bowls. He saw an oval-turning chuck at the AAW Symposium in Richmond, Virginia, shown by Christian Briseperre in the vendor area, and bought it a year or two later. Christian showed Dale how it worked. Dale likes the shape but says ovals are not relaxing to turn. He usually donates an oval bowl to his local club's annual auction.

Photos: Malcolm Zander



## Leadership style

Dale led the AAW through a time of great turbulence and successfully brought people together. His leadership style mirrors his direct no-nonsense personality. He does his homework, researches issues before a meeting, and expects all committee members to do the same. He listens quietly to everyone and then reaches a decision. His meetings begin and finish on time. In his police career, Dale had no control over who would be on his team, so he had to learn to work with diverse people.

Former AAW Director Al Hockenbery observes, "Dale is one of those rare individuals who possesses both a visionary outlook and attention to detail. These are infused in his leadership style, which begins with getting everyone to build and buy into a shared vision of what comes next, and his attention to detail ensures that actions lead to success."

Businessman Botho von Hampeln served on the AAW Board and saw Dale in action. Founder and CEO of four successful companies, Botho

describes Dale as an instinctive leader: "I have been on a number of boards, but never have I seen the kind of leadership without bullying as Dale displayed."

John Hill, former AAW Director, auctioneer emeritus, and member of the 2008 nominating committee, concurs: "I knew that he was a hard worker and dedicated woodturner but didn't imagine how effective he was as a leader. Boy was I pleased to watch him lead the AAW. If Dale needed help with something, he would ask and people would follow him and get it done. He is a natural leader."

## Giving back

On his refrigerator door, Dale keeps a quote from Winston Churchill: "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give." Dale lives by this mantra. He believes that a person should contribute to his or her community and organizations. He is a founding member and has twice been president of the Portland Cascade Woodturners Association; was chair of the NW chapter of the International Wood Collectors Society; ran the two very successful 2007 and 2018 AAW Symposia in Portland as the local liaison, in addition to serving six years on the AAW Board; and is VP and Show Chair of the Larch Mountain Country Artisans. He helped run the 2015 Oregon Woodturning Symposium and helped the Pacific Northwest Turning Guild launch the Frogwood mixed-media artist collaboration ([frogwoodcollab.com](http://frogwoodcollab.com)), which he hosted in his shop for nine years, until

it outgrew the space. He has supported young turners, opened doors for them, and encouraged collectors to buy their work. He gives to the AAW every year. His woodshop has been used for all-day demonstrations and hands-on classes since 1993. He has hosted a long and amazing list of visiting wood artists for his chapter and has also hosted a Learn-to-Turn open shop at his home on the last Saturday of each month for eight months every year since 2006, where new turners come for personal encouragement and instruction by more experienced turners, using equipment they would only usually dream of using. He even buys the coffee.

All who have known Dale Larson have commented on his quiet generosity. Former AAW Director Jean LeGwin recounts one example: "I recall an incident during a Board meeting in Saint Paul when the ED mentioned that the office efficiency was being compromised by the outdated computer system being used. Dale very quietly asked how much it would take to update the equipment, and when he heard the figure he wrote a check for that amount to AAW without fanfare (and out of sight from the rest of the Board). I happened to see the exchange and I can only guess that he has done many things like this that go unreported. He does not look for the glory or public recognition for any of his good works—he just steps up and does what is needed with no fuss."

In his self-effacing way, Dale Larson describes himself as "just a guy who makes wooden bowls." As we have seen, he is way more than that.

## Bowl turning

Major influences in Dale's forty-year bowl-turning career have been Ray Key, Richard Raffan, Bonnie Klein, and Mike Mahoney. Christian Burchard taught him to make spheres. Dale turns Pacific madrone, bigleaf maple, English and black walnut, and some cherry. To stabilize the Pacific madrone, he boils the roughed-out blanks in a large stainless-steel, firewood-heated tank for two hours and then air-dries them. Dale's spectacular shop was rebuilt in 2014 and measures 30' x 44' (9m x 13m), with full-spectrum lighting and cabinet doorknobs by ornamental turners Gorst duPlessis and Randy Rhine. It has 600 to 800 roughed-out bowls, of which he finishes 200 to 225 in a year, plus about fifteen ovals and many spheres. His bowls are sold through seven galleries.

## Global outreach

Turners Without Borders grew out of Dale's vision of the AAW as a hub for woodturners worldwide to interact and find information. An example of this outreach is the relationship with the International Wood Culture Society (IWCS), which professionally filmed and documented the 2013, 2014, and 2015 AAW International Symposia. These excellent videos are archived on the AAW's website ([woodturner.org](http://woodturner.org)) and can be found by searching for "IWCS" in the Video Source search tool. The IWCS videographers also made a short documentary on Dale, which can be found at [tiny.cc/DaleLarson](http://tiny.cc/DaleLarson). Dale attended the 2017 IWCS-sponsored World Wood Day in Long Beach, California, and hosted the IWCS team at his Gresham, Oregon, home in 2015. IWCS secretary-general Su Jinling writes:

"Dale is kind, generous, compatible, and likes to share. He is always



Dale with Gong Jin Jun. Upon arriving home in China, Mr. Gong carved groundnuts in an oval bowl he had turned with Dale.

Photos: He Yufeng, IWCS



ready, there to offer his help to others. When I told him that Chinese woodcarver [Gong Jin Jun] would like to see more of the U.S. when we joined the AAW Symposium in 2015, he immediately invited us to his home at Portland after the meeting. During our stay at his house, we picked cherries and blueberries together in his yard and learned from him to make delicious cherry and blueberry pies. Since there were three of us Chinese staying in the house, he let us cook whatever we wanted for the group in his kitchen. He ate Chinese food during our stays and we almost turned his kitchen into a Chinese restaurant. It made us so happy to eat so comfortably in a foreign country."

Dale taught Su Jinling, who had never turned, to make a sphere and a bowl and introduced Gong Jin Jun to bowl turning. Gong Jin Jun, who spoke no English, had some



International Wood Culture Society representatives Su Jinling and Gong Jin Jun make shavings with Dale in his Oregon shop.

Photo: He Yufeng, IWCS.

woodturning experience but had never made a bowl. Su Jinling adds, "After we returned to China, Mr. Gong carved some groundnuts inside the bottom of his bowl. Groundnuts in Chinese culture have a connotation of propitiousness and good luck. Mr. Gong hopes the friendship carried by the bowl will last forever." ▶



World Wood Day, Long Beach, California, 2017. Woodturning participants, including Dale, front center, and Su Jinling, second from left in the back row.

Photo: Courtesy of Mike Hou, Director, IWCS



Dale's 30' x 44' workshop, built in 2014, designed by woodturner, AAW member, and architect David Williams. This view shows about half the shop.

Photo: Dale Larson



Bowl blanks, mostly Spanish chestnut, air-drying in Dale's shop.

Photo: Dale Larson

## Dale on woodturning

"I have been turning for forty years now and my bowls are still getting better. I am still learning. I worry about the day when my next bowl is not as good as my last bowl. Turning brings balance to my life. I can go out to the shop and work with pretty wood, making something that will be used in someone's home for many years. I find bowl turning to be calming and rewarding.

"What I like about the woodturning community is that it is a great leveler. It really doesn't matter what

you did before or outside of woodturning. You are only judged on how good a turner and artist you are and how much you contribute to the woodturning community."

## Dale on shop management

"Space. Space is valuable. There are two rules that apply to any woodshop. First, any flat surface will collect stuff. Second, you will expand to fill the available space. I have had to clean out too many shops of my friends that have gone to the big woodshop in the sky. They are generally full of junk and wood that is not usable and is taking up valuable space. Keep the best wood and burn or give away the rest and make room in your shop so you can work."

## Summary

Dale's contribution to woodturning and to the AAW cannot be overstated. He is an exceptional leader and a superb organizer, a deep thinker who sees both the big picture and the small details, and an unusual mix of tough ethical cop and generous intellectual mentor.

As Sergeant Larson would say, taking out his trusty "analog computer" (a clipboard): "Just the facts, Ma'am." ■

*To see an excellent video about Dale Larson created by the International Wood Culture Society, visit [tiny.cc/DaleLarson](http://tiny.cc/DaleLarson).*

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*Malcolm Zander is a New Zealand-born wood artist living in Ottawa, Canada. His website is [malcolmzander.com](http://malcolmzander.com).*

## In Other Words:

"Dale embodies the willingness to share everything he has, his considerable knowledge, his home, his shop, his tools, his tireless work ethic, his time, and his friendship. I hope Dale outlives me, as I can't imagine the woodturning community without him."

—Steve Newberry, Past President of Cascade Woodturners and twenty-nine-year woodturner friend

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"Best bowls I have ever held in my hand."  
—Howard Borer, twenty-nine-year member, Cascade Woodturners



*Salt and Pepper Shakers, 2014, Pacific madrone, African blackwood, 2¾" (7cm) diameter*

Dale enjoys turning spheres. He says they are a good exercise in tool control. These hollowed spheres have threaded lids.

Photo: Malcolm Zander