

PROFILES

A PUBLICATION OF THE CABINET MAKERS ASSOCIATION

FEATURED SHOP:
PERIWINKLERS

ASSOCIATE OF THE QUARTER:
JB CUTTING

BUILDING THE FUTURE:
FINDING TALENT

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CONTENTS

2 PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

32 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

4 NEWS ROUNDUP
Tradeshow Preview
Women of Woodworking

7 NEW MEMBERS

8 ASSOCIATE OF THE QUARTER
JB Cutting

14 FEATURED SHOP
Periwinklers

22 BUILDING THE FUTURE:
FINDING TALENT

Manufacturing Day celebrations

Meeting the future at regional events



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Periwinklers

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FEATURED SHOP:

Periwinklers

No Boundaries

By Carla Atkinson

Lois Snyder is a mover, a shaker and a boundary-breaker.

She developed a love of building things way back in elementary school, when girls weren't even allowed to wear pants to school.

"My father saved my fourth-grade report card – it says 'mediocre, mediocre, mediocre' and then the teacher adds, 'However, Lois was the leader of all of our building projects,'" Snyder says with a laugh.

She began drafting in junior high school, and in high school she took more drafting classes and did independent studies in architecture.

"I didn't take shop class, as girls didn't do that – yes, even in the 70s," she says.

Like the women in her family who had come before her, Snyder's plan was to head to college after high school graduation in 1977.

She didn't realize you could study woodworking in college, so she started by applying to Boston University and Carnegie Mellon and got into their schools of architecture. "I went to visit Boston University and I saw all these people standing and drafting in silence; I don't know how I knew, but I knew I couldn't do that."

Instead, she landed at State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz, a liberal arts college in the Hudson Valley region. She earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in wood design in 1983.

Then she moved to the "bad lands" of Brooklyn, as she puts it, where her first shop was an abandoned building. "We borrowed a hose and an extension cord and camped out," she recalls. "I bought my first table saw and joiner with my student loan money."

Most of her early projects were in Manhattan – in Midtown and on the Upper East and Upper West Sides.

When she was 30, she met her first husband, Rob Hyslop.

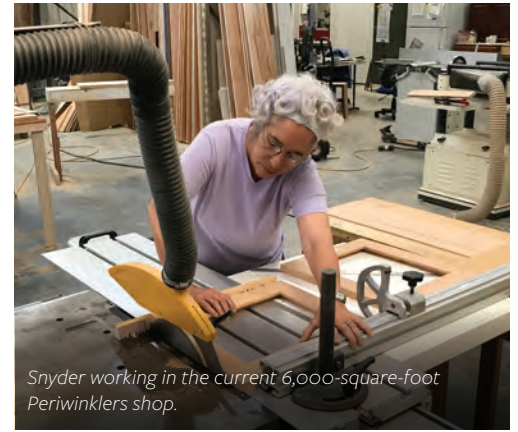
"I was very excited that he wasn't a carpenter," she says. "Turns out he loved woodworking also. We left Brooklyn and moved to Norwalk, Connecticut. During this time, I did renovating work and put a major addition on our home. I used to joke that most guys didn't worry that their wife was home tearing down walls while they were at work!"

Sadly, her husband passed away after a three-year illness. She finished the house on her own, sold it and moved to Florida.

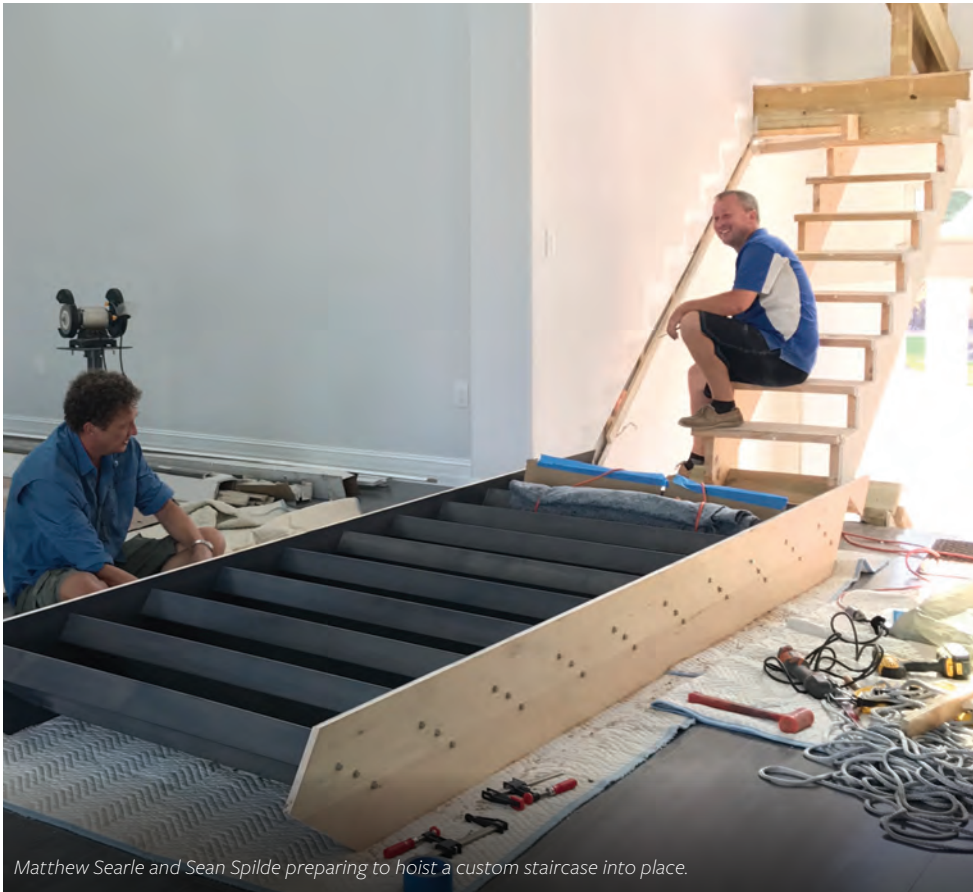
Snyder, now 59, ran Fine Art Wood Works in Tarpon Springs, Florida, from 2002



Snyder building a kitchen island in 1983.



Snyder working in the current 6,000-square-foot Periwinklers shop.



Matthew Searle and Sean Spilde preparing to hoist a custom staircase into place.



The 60-foot Periwinkle is Snyder and Searle's "in-house project." Future plans include a complete rebuild of the superstructure.



"I'm known for doing furniture-quality custom cabinetry. Today, it's considered rare to find people with design and build experience, especially in my part of Florida. In 1983, I was the wave of the future. In 2018, I am considered a rare master!" — Lois Snyder

until 2012. In 2016, she opened another shop, Periwinklers, also in Tarpon Springs. “I’m known for doing furniture-quality custom cabinetry,” she says. “Today, it’s considered rare to find people with design and build experience, especially in my part of Florida. In 1983, I was the wave of the future. In 2018, I am considered a rare master!”

MAKING IT THROUGH THICK AND THIN

If you ever have a chance to talk with Lois Snyder, you’ll find that she laughs a lot.

She’s such an upbeat person that you find yourself startled when she mentions in passing — matter-of-factly — some of the difficult hurdles she’s dealt with over the years.

Following her husband’s death, juggling solo parenting and work was challenging. Snyder was not only a single parent, but a single parent of a child with serious medical issues. Her daughter was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age 3 and went through several years of seizures, most of which happened at night. This meant that Snyder had to learn to function with very little sleep.

Then she faced a wrenching experience on the job: An accident in the shop of her first Tarpon Springs business led to the death of an employee. He had a lengthy hospital stay and eventually went home. He died three months after the accident when he went into sepsis. She closed the business in 2012.

“Eventually I got back to working alone,” she says. “I couldn’t deal with the idea of someone else getting hurt, but there are always risks in a shop. This business is not for the faint of heart.”

SERENDIPITY

Then three years ago, she met Matthew Searle via an online dating site.

“I’m a tomboy and always look like I just got out of the shop, and he is a ‘dresser,’” she says. “He showed up for our first date in his red Corvette, and I showed up in my old Honda. We had fun and laughed a lot, but I thought, ‘I’ll never see this guy again.’”

She was wrong: That date kicked off a happy personal and professional partnership.

Searle attended the London College of Furniture and spent his early years working as a polisher (“we call them ‘finishers’ here,” she explains) for his father’s company in London. Some of his jobs included Westminster Abbey, Windsor Castle and various museums.

Together they began Periwinklers.

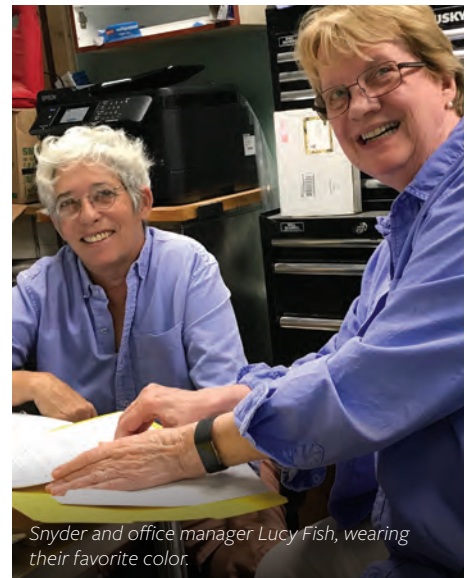
Why Periwinklers? It’s pretty straightforward, she says: “My favorite color is periwinkle. Our boat is called the Periwinkle, and our company truck is painted periwinkle.”

In a twist that CMA members will appreciate, Snyder married Searle in 2017 while at the AWFS show in Las Vegas.

The idea came to them after they arrived, and they got the paperwork they needed. Then they went to breakfast one morning, and Searle happened to notice a wedding chapel adjacent to the restaurant. When they asked about getting married, the answer was, “The guy could be here in 10 minutes.”

“We were on our way to the show, and I was wearing shorts,” Snyder says. “But we’d both been married before, and we didn’t care about those things. A nice young man married us, the photographer was the witness, and that was it.

“Then we went to the show – all before 11 am!” she says. “The funny thing is, it couldn’t have been any nicer if we’d planned it.”



Snyder and office manager Lucy Fish, wearing their favorite color.

CMA Camaraderie

“I enjoy having people who are in the business to bounce things off — share successes, issues, ideas,” Lois Snyder says. “The CMA is a very open group of people. If you have a problem or a question, you’ll find plenty of answers here. What machine to buy, who’s using what software and why, how to deal with most any issue. Beyond that, it’s great to get out and talk shop with the ‘guys!’”

Lessons she has learned over the years have helped Snyder create a business where she can put her strengths to work and rely on her employees to complement those strengths with their own.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Lessons she has learned over the years have helped Snyder create a business where she can put her strengths to work and rely on her employees to complement those strengths with their own.

For instance, “paperwork is not my thing,” she says, “and if I had to do it myself, I would be lost.”

Instead, that responsibility goes to her office manager Lucy Fish, who happens to have a PhD and was the CFO of a medical device company for 14 years. Periwinklers currently has three full-time and three part-time employees.

“I’m better at design, building, and engineering,” Snyder says. “Happily, I don’t have to do all the physical stuff anymore. I have a great foreman now – John Richards, an ex-Army Ranger. You can’t ask for more than a no-nonsense person like John.”

Snyder and Searle’s roles in Periwinklers are “reversed from what people assume,” she says. “I design, do CAD drawings, purchasing, engineering, etc. Matthew is my support system. He assists with purchasing long lead items, accompanies me to meetings when I want a big guy to back me up, and does anything else that needs doing while he also works on new inventions.”

Searle has spent most of his life designing/inventing for the military and holds 16 US patents. He owns Maritime Arresting Technologies, which makes (as you might have guessed) boat-stopping devices. “We have made many prototypes in our facility,” she says.

Searle’s other business dovetails well with Periwinklers. He and his business partner Shawn Spilde do a lot of government contract work, and sometimes they have down time due to government red tape. When this happens, they help maintain and fix Periwinklers’ equipment and jump in on installs, which is an unusual advantage, Snyder says.

ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

It’s no secret that cabinet making is heavily dominated by men, so Lois Snyder’s story wouldn’t be complete

without her unique perspective on being a successful woman in the industry for three-plus decades.

“Women in my generation were at a huge disadvantage if we were drawn to this kind of work,” she says. “We were not the ones out there in the garage with our dads, for the most part. As much as we want to think we’ve come a long way, we need for times to keep changing.

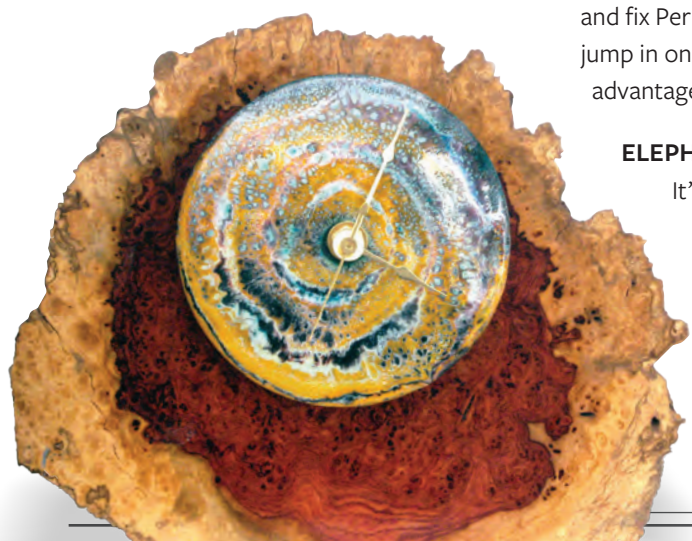
“If I go to a trade show, many people don’t really talk to me, particularly now – I’m in my 50s, I have gray hair, and I don’t walk around looking like someone’s arm candy!” she says. “My husband has to tell them, ‘You have to talk to her – I don’t know what you’re talking about.’”

Snyder believes she is currently the only female CMA member who runs a shop solo. “I know there are husband-and-wife teams and other variations, but I believe I’m unique in that I’ve built \$50,000 jobs myself, start to finish, including installation,” she says.

Being a boss to men can be interesting, she says. When her foreman first began working in her shop, he told her, “I don’t care if you’re male or female as long as you do the job.”

Now, Snyder says, “he tells me, ‘I love working for you because you don’t just

Periwinklers also sells clocks handcrafted from one-of-a-kind pieces of wood collected from around the world. The clock faces of vitreous enamel on copper are a collaboration handcrafted in the Periwinklers studio by three artists in Snyder’s family: daughter Annie Mickel, sister Catherine Snyder/Kovacs, and mother Phyllis Atkinson. This clock features a curly maple “burl.”



sit there and tell me how to do it. You know how to do it, and you can do it yourself. You know exactly what I need.”

She tried at one point to have an all-woman shop, but “it was too difficult to find women who were already woodworkers and too time-consuming to train them up all at once.” She currently has one female apprentice on staff.

Snyder says there are elements of her work where she believes gender differences come into play.

“For the past five years, our work has mostly involved collaborating with women who are finally getting their dream kitchens,” Snyder says. “This is been fun for me, and I believe the fact that I’m a woman has been a huge advantage in this situation. They feel at ease with me, possibly in a way they would not with a man. I’ve observed guys in the business who are used to being the problem solvers and are more likely to come in and tell you what you want instead of the other way around.”

She adds that there have been times when she wondered if she was not as well-rounded as her peers in the business.

“I know I’m not as money- and business-driven as some people are,” she says. “I love to work with clients and give people what they envision. I’m more of the artist than the business person, in other words. When I was younger, I was not as good a negotiator as I am now.”

NO END IN SIGHT

While she has experienced work in the industry differently as a woman, Snyder believes it’s unwise to pigeonhole people in any way, especially at a time when it’s so important to attract young people to the business.




“You can generalize about the people who show up to work in a woodshop, but you may be surprised to find out what they’re actually like,” she says, noting with a laugh that she is a vegetarian who meditates regularly.

Snyder also defies expectations in another way: While she’s only five-foot-three, she has rarely allowed that to limit her in the shop.

“I was an athlete before I figured out I had a talent in woodworking, and it turned out that physicality was a big help in cabinetmaking,” she says. “You really have to be able to move and put your body into all sorts of situations. I have a photo of myself stuffed inside a cabinet re-doing some electrical work that was taken on a recent birthday, and I thought, ‘Could I have imagined 30 years ago that I would still be doing this?’”

There’s one important reason she’s still at it.

“I have fun at work,” she says. “That’s one thing I demand of the people who work with me. We can’t be serious all the time. I don’t go for grumbling or bad moods. I’ve seen a lot of workplaces where they really suffer, and I refuse. As long as I’m having fun, I’ll probably be doing this when I’m 80!” 

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