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A bowl turned by Jan Bachman from spalted maple. Courtesy photo

One good turn deserves another

BY BARB MOSHER,
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Jan Bachman used to look at downed trees and see firewood. Now he sees bowls, vases, urns, platters, twig pots, wine glass stems, tool and utensil handles, pens, pencils, wine stoppers, and wig stands.

“I used to think of wood I could burn,” said the Elk Rapids Township resident. “Now I think of wood I can turn.”

Bachman turns sections of logs on a lathe in his Bass Lake home woodshop to create unique functional pieces, most of which he gives away to non-profit organizations to use for door prizes, raffles, and silent auctions. “What I do with what I turn is give it away,” he said. “For me, it’s like my volunteer work.”

While the retired clinical psychologist is relatively new to woodturning — he turned his first pieces in 2018 — his interest in the craft goes back decades. A friend was a professional potter, and Bachman loved watching him create something beautiful out of a hunk of clay. “I wasn’t good at art, but I always thought something like that would be nice to do, and

that maybe woodturning might be it,” he recalled.

Bachman took advantage of the opportunity to purchase a used lathe in 1984, but it sat silent for 34 years while he raised his family downstate and pursued a career in treating the behavioral and psychological aspects of chronic pain. When he and his wife, Cheryl, built their retirement home on Bass Lake, he brought along the lathe. A chance encounter with a woodturner led to an invitation to check out the Northwestern Michigan Woodturners club that meets monthly in Traverse City.

“After I started going to meetings, I cleaned up my lathe and got it ready to turn,” Bachman said. “But I realized early on I would want one newer than one made in 1945, although it worked fine. So I sold it to a blacksmith who wanted to start incorporating wood with his ironwork, and I found another nice used one.”

Although he was fascinated by the techniques of experienced woodturners as they applied a variety of sharp tools against a spinning log to carve away excess wood, it took Bachman eight months of club meetings before he felt confident enough to stand at a lathe himself. Friend and fellow local woodturner Jim McKimmy mentored him and loaned him tools until he gradually acquired his own.

“I’d seen demonstrations at the club, but Jim showed me up close,” Bachman said. “He let me turn and first thing I turned on his lathe was a little wine stopper and a pen.”

He now has his own space dedicated to woodturning, a two-room workshop he calls his “sanctuary.” One room stores wood in various stages of production: logs still in their natural state; logs sawn vertically in half with the pith removed; “blanks” (wood that’s been cut or rounded smooth in preparation for turning); bowls that are rough turned into their general shape but are drying and waiting to be turned again into their final shape and thickness; and boxes of scrap wood, because woodturners hate to waste anything. The second room is home to two lathes,



Woodturning uses a lathe and a variety of handheld instruments to shape logs into bowls, vases, and other objects. Photo by Barb Mosher



Jan Bachman makes wig stands for patients undergoing chemotherapy. Courtesy photo

a variety of handheld woodturning tools, a grinder for sharpening tools, a band saw, and a drill press.

Bachman said it’s the revelation of what’s inside a log — the unpredictable grain patterns, hues, colorations, textures, natural voids, even insect-created holes and trails — that makes turning each salvaged chunk of wood into a creative adventure. “A log can be lying down rotting on the ground, but then you get something of beauty out of it,” Bachman said. “You never know what you’re going to see inside.”

For example, he explained, a boxelder that’s been damaged or injured will yield “red flaming” in its grain pattern. A birch tree that’s started to rot results

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in spalting (dark lines or streaks in the grain of the wood) from bacteria in the rotting process. And when a tree has been infested with ambrosia beetles, their activity leaves behind oblong tapered streaks of varying colors.

Just about any kind of wood can be turned into something decorative and useful, but hardwoods yield a more durable finished product than softwoods. Bachman gravitates to walnut, birch, maple, and Chinese elm. “And I can never get enough of black cherry, honey locust, hemlock, burr oak, river birch, crab apple, mulberry,” he added. “Lilac is nice, but you don’t see big hunks of that.”

He also prefers freshly or recently cut wood. Because of its higher moisture content, such greenwood is more easily turned. But it also shrinks as it dries, warping and sometimes cracking, which Bachman said adds to the uniqueness of the finished product as long as a perfectly round product is not the goal.

Perfectly round or not, Bachman’s work has benefitted a variety of organizations throughout the region including the Alzheimer’s Association and Grass River Natural Area. Along with fellow Northwestern Michigan Woodturners members, he also donates wig stands to Munson Healthcare’s Cowell Family Cancer Center that are gifted to patients undergoing treatment. And many of the 275 (or so) bowls he has turned have ended up in the hands of attendees of Northwest Food Coalition’s Empty Bowls, an annual event that raises money and awareness for the issue of food insecurity in northwest Michigan.

Then there was the original white pine mast of the Traverse City-based schooner *Madeline* operated by the Maritime Heritage Alliance. “I got the old mast off that ship, most of it, and out of that I turned 20 bowls, pens, pencils, wine stoppers, and vases and gave them back to them for their fundraising,” Bachman said. “White pine isn’t something woodturners look forward to turning, but I counted at least 150 rings on that mast, so you know it’s older than that, because it had been shaved down, so some rings were missing.

It had been on that boat for 30 years, so I’m guessing it was relatively close to 200 years old.”

While Bachman said the piles of logs stacked around his home will provide more wood than he’ll be able to use in his lifetime, his heart is still drawn to the promise inherent in any fallen timber. “I’ll be driving along and see something lying there and wish I had my chainsaw,” he said. “If I see something special, I’ll go after it. Instead of it being an unhappy log, I make something out of it, and it turns out to be something happy.”

For more information on Northwestern Michigan Woodturners, visit www.tturners.com. For more information on this year’s Northwest Food Coalition’s Empty Bowls fundraiser (April 28), visit www.northwestmifoodcoalition.org.



Jan Bachman shows his work at a meeting of the Northwestern Michigan Woodturners club. Photo courtesy of NMW.



Jan Bachman shapes a bowl in his workshop. Photo by Barb Mosher