

Woody You!

IF YOU BUILD IT, SAYS STEPHEN SUSSMAN, THEY WILL STEP ON IT

DO I LIKE TO WORK WITH MY HANDS?"

That's my editor asking me if I'd be willing to spend a Saturday creating something from a few planks of wood for a story. Sure, I replied, why not? But before I set off to take on my new career as a woodworker, I decided to get some professional advice on whether or not, at my 50-something age, I could actually learn a new trick. I spoke with Dr. Gordon Winocur, a senior scientist at Baycrest's Rotman Research Institute in Toronto. Winocur is a proponent of the "use it or lose it theory" when it comes to maintaining cognitive brain function. In other words, the good doctor suggests the more active the lifestyle, the better patients do on cognitive tests, adding, "When the brain is stimulated, you feel good, with a sense of confidence and a better sense of well-being."

That sounds like just what I need, although I can still remember my times spent in high school woodshop. The instructor, Mr. Crilly, was supervising our construction of wooden plates on the lathe. As I think of it now it is humorous, but back then, not! As my plate spun on the twirling lathe, I continued to apply pressure until my plate was the thickness of a paper towel. Then my project suddenly exploded, sending shards of wood across the entire room. Today, I hoped would be different. How hard could it be to build a stepstool?

As soon as I arrive at the Wm. Perry Studio for the shop's "Make a Shaker-Style Stepstool" seminar, I realize this is not the old-style shop class. Today's workshop is fully booked but comprises an intimate number of students, five men and one

woman. Although our host, Bill Perry, says some women are intimidated by working with wood and power tools, he admits, however, that women do tend to pick up some of the techniques more quickly. Before getting to work, we warm up with fresh coffee and homemade biscotti. As I enjoy, I can't help but be impressed with some of Perry's work that is sitting around his newly opened studio in the Leaside neighbourhood of Toronto. Various styles of wooden chairs, clocks and a long wooden bench made from a single plank of raw wood, showcase his fine furniture making skills of more than 30 years.

In the pre-building briefing, Perry tells us, "Not to worry, in case of accidents, the hospital is only five minutes away." Very reassuring. He then introduces our choices of wood. Cherry? Walnut? I can't really tell the difference, and I think about how much easier things seem at Ikea, except for the funny Swedish names. Cherry it is.

We are all assigned a partner and, luckily, mine, named Mike, is not only an engineer, but he's obviously also spent a lot more time in the workshop, knowing the difference between a dado and a drill, unlike yours truly.

MY FIRST STEP is to use the jointer to square my wood. Everyone digs in. Immediately, the room is filled with the smell of fresh wood being cut. Heavenly! Next step is the crosscut with the table saw. Spinning at 3,500 rpm, it looks like the same kind of cutting apparatus magicians might use to saw their beautiful assistants

in half. I hope my fingers don't meet the same end.

Over the next five hours, Perry patiently takes his disciples through cutting, routing and chiselling. After about two hours, I have my cherry stepstool cut and dry-assembled. Then it's time for a quick lunch of delicious "handy-guy" sandwiches and fruit salad — and back to work.

As the power tools whirl around me I see that everyone is becoming quite passionate about their project. Sanding, nailing, routing ... "It's like Santa's workshop," Mike observes. By now I'm feeling quite proud of myself. My joints are tight, and my cherrywood has been sanded to a glowing patina. Then, just as I am about to pound my antique nails into my four pre-drilled holes, I realize one of my steps is upside down. I try to pry the joint apart, but the quickset glue holds on refusing to release my step. Suddenly, Perry is over my shoulder. "Don't worry," he says with a smile, and he reaches in, manages to pop the step out and inserts it perfectly in place. With four quick taps to the nails the step stool is finished and ready to be oiled.

Aside from exercising my motor skills and my thought process, I'm also surprised how a day spent in a woodworking class relaxes and soothes the mind and soul after a long hard week. I proudly bring home my treasure and present it to my wife, who can barely believe that I actually created such a natural looking thing. The only one more surprised, is the author. ■

WM. PERRY STUDIO FINE FURNITURE & WINDSOR CHAIR DESIGNS, 416-429-2323, WWW.WMPERRY.CA