



Bringing Woodturning to the Blind

Allen Miller and Andi Sullivan

During AAW’s 2013 international symposium in Tampa, and in coordination with AAW’s Accessible Lathe Program, we organized a program for the Tampa chapter of the Lighthouse for the Blind, a non-profit organization. With the assistance of Lighthouse staff members Sheryl Brown and Chelsea Bridges, we had eight blind individuals from the Lighthouse attend a session in which they were able to handle turned objects. Afterward, with individual assistance, they each successfully turned a pen in the Youth room, thanks to the gracious help

of Larry Miller, Joe Ruminski and several volunteers. The response to this program was fantastic. The attendees were extremely enthusiastic and are eager to continue their woodturning experience.

To develop an ongoing woodturning program at the Lighthouse for the Blind in Tampa, we enlisted the help of donors to supply a lathe, sufficient tools, supplies, and funds to get the program started. Since this was to be the first program to provide woodturning instruction to blind and visually impaired individuals, we had to overcome several barriers.

We readily obtained the enthusiastic support of the Lighthouse and they provided a suitable work area. The Lighthouse became an AAW chapter to provide appropriate insurance coverage and developed consent and release documents in Spanish and English for our volunteer instructors. New students read, or have read to them, the consent forms prior to turning, and a chapter meeting is held prior to each session.

Once everything was in place, we had our first session with six students. Since then the response has been more than we had imagined. We initially



Carol Reyes “seeing” with her hands a small box made by Andi Wolfe.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



Willie Nelson Jr. contemplates John Wessels’ piece.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



José Rilo and his granddaughter Rachel examine Andi Wolfe’s textured box.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



Several members of the Lighthouse group visit the Instant Gallery.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



Allen Miller helps Carol Reyes to turn her own pen.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



Andi Sullivan explores J. Paul Fennell’s deeply textured hollow form.

Photo: Malcolm Zander

planned to have one session a month and now have two. More than 40 students have participated and there is a waiting list.

We are still very much in a learning phase. Our students have varying disabilities, which influences our teaching program. In addition, some of our repeat students are advancing, while still taking classes with beginners. We try to tailor our instruction to each individual, to keep it interesting for everyone.

We primarily have been turning pens; there is a wide variety of experience that can be gained in this activity. The ongoing challenge is to allow the six students per session adequate time for practice. Important in this type of teaching is continuity of instruction—students do better with only one or two instructors. We hope to recruit turners from nearby local chapters to assist, with the long-term goal of teaching someone at the Lighthouse to become the principal instructor.

Our aim is to set up a woodturning program at the Lighthouse for the Blind in each city where the AAW's symposium is held. For Phoenix, we will again have a panel discussion, interactive tactile session, tour of the Instant Gallery and hands-on turning for the visually impaired. We intend to raise sufficient funds and sign up local volunteers to run a woodturning program at the Phoenix Lighthouse for the Blind. Contact Allen Miller and Andi Sullivan at admiller923@gmail.com if you would like to help.

These Tampa Lighthouse activities were videotaped by Mike Hou from the International Wood Culture Society. See <http://vimeo.com/groups/205403/videos/81100469> ■



A pewter-and-red-ivory bowl by John Wessels is a tactile magnet for exploring fingers.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



Mary Graham turns her first pen under the instruction of Joe Ruminski.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



Willie Nelson Jr proudly shows his first turned pen.

Photo: Malcolm Zander



Don Bessicks assists Mary Graham in polishing her pen.

Photo: Andi Wolfe

Do you know someone with a disability who might get enjoyment out of woodturning? There are a number of such people in the AAW membership, from partially or minimally sighted persons to turners in wheelchairs. For many of them, woodturning has turned their life around, and their stories are inspiring.

The AAW now has a new discussion sub-forum where members wishing to help disabled folks learn woodturning may interact with those who could use their assistance. Those with disabilities of any kind may tell their stories, and seek and find assistance with turning. This sub-forum is available at aawforum.org/vbforum/forumdisplay.php?f=20.

The sub-forum is also linked to the new AAW program, Woodturning Beyond Barriers, which is developing resources and approaches for teaching woodturning to those with disabilities. See woodturner.org/accessibility/index.htm.

Visit these two websites to learn how you can help a disabled person in your area discover woodturning. It can be a rewarding experience for you both.