

A windfall of wood: Employee featured in woodturning magazine

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Special to AEP Now



Some of the beautifully-crafted woodturned items made by Dennis DeVendra include bowls, small containers with lids, and icicle-shaped and acorn-shaped ornaments.

Gusts from Hurricane Ike blew through Central Ohio in September, knocking out power to some 700,000 AEP Ohio customers. For woodturner Dennis DeVendra, the storm created a literal windfall of wood. Friends split the trees that fell in their yards and delivered the logs to DeVendra's home in German Village, a few miles south of where he works at AEP Headquarters in Columbus.

DeVendra, a manager in IT applications, began turning wood four years ago. The hobby would be unremarkable, except that DeVendra is blind.

"It's an escape," DeVendra explained. "It takes your full attention. When you have something spinning 1,000 RPMs and you stick your finger in the wrong place, you'll get cut or bruised."

At AEP, DeVendra manages two teams of developers and contractors. One team focuses on the integration of applications facilitating the exchange of data between two or more systems. The other team develops applications for Lotus Notes.

DeVendra has worked at AEP for a decade. Prior to joining AEP, he was a director at Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic in New Jersey, and developer and systems analyst at IBM.

He knew he was going blind when he was 21 years old and a student at The Ohio State University. The diagnosis was retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic eye disease. He stopped driving when he was 27.

He started woodworking before he lost his sight, first building a clock from a kit. Years later, he constructed mission-style tables for his kitchen and living room. He moved on to thick cutting boards made from a mix of colorful, exotic woods such as blood wood, purple heart, maple, cherry and walnut. He would cut them into slats and run them through a planer to make them flat and smooth.

His wife, Eugenia, would glue the slats into patterns. Then, DeVendra took over moving the boards through the planer again, cutting off the ends, routing the edges and making them smooth as glass with a drum sander.

"People said my cutting boards look like a piece of art," DeVendra said. "But, it's pretty mechanical to make them. Woodturning allows me a chance to be more creative."

Inspired by a friend who also is blind, DeVendra attended the meetings of a local woodturning chapter. Most there were hesitant to talk with or approach him. To learn more, he took a class in woodturning. He bought a lathe, gouges and sharpening tools and set up a shop in his garage.

"I started by making pens. I sold a few and gave the rest as gifts." DeVendra said. "But after awhile, I wanted to do more."

DeVendra learned more advanced techniques by reading books and having Eugenia watch videos with him. He joined the local woodturning club and attended some of their mentoring sessions. Eventually, he studied in Pennsylvania under Robert Rosand, a master woodturner.

As his skills improved, DeVendra moved on to more difficult pieces, such as bowls with sides just less than a quarter-inch thick, icicle and acorn-shaped ornaments, and small boxes with lids. And, he began selling his work on a Web site he designed and maintains --www.blindwoodturner.com.



Dennis DeVendra at his woodturning shop.

"I can make these things, but if I don't sell them, I'm making them only for my family and it gets pretty boring," DeVendra said.

Safety first

Before he starts to work each weekend in his studio, DeVendra dons a thick, leather apron and safety glasses. He remembers the first tenet of woodturning -- know where your hands and tools are at all times in relationship to the wood.

He starts with a blank, a block of wood cut to size for a project. For an acorn ornament, he'll attach the blank to the lathe, and then power it on. The blank rotates more than 1,000 times per minute. He closes

his eyes, and then begins making the basic shape of the nut.

"In woodturning, when you've got it right, you can hear it," he said.

The tool on wood makes an even, smooth hissing sound. Ribbons of wood fly off the gouge, land on his arms, and then fall to the floor. When the lathe stops, the cut is smooth and even. A good turner doesn't have to sand much.

DeVendra measures the length and diameter of his work with a click stick, a measuring stick about six inches long. It extends to more than three feet, clicking in 1/16-inch increments. He uses calipers to measure the thickness of his bowls and boxes.

To finish the wooden acorn, he drills a small hole in the larger end of the blank, then shapes the tip of the nut. After making the cap, he turns a piece of wood into a perch an eighth of an inch in diameter.

Eugenia glues the pieces together and adds the finishes to the piece.

"I'll probably get better at finishing eventually," DeVendra said. "I get the glue everywhere, especially super glue."

Giving back by mentoring

In addition to selling his work at craft shows, DeVendra encourages other people with disabilities to take up woodturning. His shop and works were featured in this month's issue of [Woodturning](#) magazine (pages [1](#), [2](#) and [3](#) of article). He's working on a series of articles for the American Association of Woodturners and he's mentoring a student at the Ohio State School for the Blind.

He also shows able-bodied woodturners how he works, hoping they might find a new or alternative way to solve a problem at the lathe.

"We all have challenges," DeVendra said. "It's just what are they."

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Reactions

This is awesome!

Posted by [Shirley Sprenger](#) on 11/11/2008 8:48:12 AM

Thank you so much for sharing this story. My father suffers from glaucoma and started loosing his eyesight a couple years ago. He has been a woodworker for over 30 years and makes some of the most beautiful furniture. It broke my heart when I realized that he may never be able to enjoy his hobby and share his wonderful gift. I can't wait to share this inspirational story with him. Thanks.

Posted by [Carrie D Walton](#) on 11/11/2008 9:35:45 AM

I always been a great fan of DeVendra ever since I heard about him at AEP. I had a chance to talk him about his remarkable skills. Its facinating to know him and his works, in AEP and outside AEP.

He is truely a great role model to have things in perspective.

Posted by [Srinivasa V Kalidindi](#) on 11/11/2008 9:36:09 AM

Inspiring!

Posted by [Jacqueline J Marinelli](#) on 11/11/2008 9:38:46 AM

Truly inspiring and heart-warming story. I must say that the arts of work shown in the picture are truly works of art and I think they're fantastic. DeVendra is a real artist and does a great job. Thanks for this great story!

Posted by [Josh R Doss](#) on 11/11/2008 9:46:42 AM

Great, work Dennis

Posted by [Willie Vizcaino](#) on 11/11/2008 11:28:52 AM

Beautiful and inspiring. Thank you for sharing your wonderful gift with us.

Posted by [Angie Wright](#) on 11/11/2008 11:43:47 AM

excellent people do not take time for detail anymore.

Posted by [Brenda Maksimovic](#) on 11/11/2008 11:44:50 AM

Fantastic story, a great example of staying true to your creative instincts regardless of the challenges you may face. This is a great and inspirational story.

Posted by [Julie A Mettes](#) on 11/11/2008 12:39:17 PM

Wonderful Work, Dennis. It is stories such as yours that truly make me step back and say WOW. You are an inspiration to me as well as others.

Posted by [Roy Bermea](#) on 11/11/2008 12:49:20 PM

This is really an impressive story. It leaves me without excuse to use my time better and initiate my creative side. All of us have the same amount of time and are creative and DeVendra's story should give us the jumpstart to do the same. Thanks for the story and the example it sets at least for me.

Posted by [Arabella S Gulick](#) on 11/11/2008 12:53:42 PM

What a great story about one of our gifted and talented fellow employees. Thank you Dennis for sharing your story and inspiration to all that may come in contact with you. You have been truly blessed and I know you are a blessing to others.

Posted by [Perry Hurley](#) on 11/11/2008 1:56:20 PM