

BARB'S BARN

A remarkable woman gives help, opportunity

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BASEBALL IN THIS COUNTRY IS A NATIONAL passion, along with hockey, basketball, and football. But you don't hear much about lacrosse, rugby or cricket, even though these sports are played here and require every bit as much athletic prowess. I think the explanation lies in the fact that for every major league center fielder in uniform, there are hundreds of thousands of other Americans who play the game. Many of them dream of the day they'll be in the playoffs, but only a few will. But most will enjoy what they do, while admiring those who reach the peak. What drives the engine is the vast number who both aspire and admire.

This reminds me of Barbara, known to turners in Western New York as the proprietor of Barb's Barn. A member of the Western New York Woodturners Association, Barb does for turners what every good coach and teacher does for future athletes and scholars: she provides the opportunity and encouragement to go beyond what might be possible for the average learner and is flattered, not threatened, when someone develops beyond her own skill level.

Barb's late brother was a trauma surgeon whose avocational passion was his Virginia workshop equipped for every variety of woodworking, including turning. Her visits to his home and shop sparked curiosity, then the urge to try her own hand at the lathe. From there she discovered a then small group in the Buffalo area whose common interest in turning had given birth to the Western New York Woodturners Association. She became our first female member and soon began to play a key role in our goal of skill development.

That role began to crystallize about five years ago through a feature that has become a vital and popular en-



Barb's Barn: Tranquil winter scene disguises high-energy turning workshop.



Barbara Berger has turned her fully equipped woodshop near Buffalo, NY, into a resource for members of the Western NY Woodturners Association looking for hands-on workshops from top instructors. Photos by Kurt Hertzog

richment for our members. We call it Barb's Barn. Behind her home in the semi-rural outskirts of Buffalo, is a barn-like structure that is the dream of most craftsmen. Due in large part to her late husband, Eddy, owner of a lumber and millwork business, the

barn is a fully equipped woodshop — a little private haven for most woodworkers. But for Barb, if it's a haven, it's not private. Barb has never understood about keeping good things to herself. As a result she began to see the barn as a resource for members of

the Association who could benefit from hands-on workshops under the direct tutelage of master turners both from AAW and our own membership. So began one of the more powerful educational traditions within our group.

Several times a year, more often in the milder weather, the sign-up sheet will circulate at one of our regular meetings for people interested in spending a Saturday at Barb's Barn participating in a project-focused workshop. Frequently this has been in conjunction with a visit by a nationally recognized turner whom we have sponsored for a weekend of demonstrations. Bob Rosand is one of our more frequent guests and now an unofficial adoptee of Barb. He and others will typically be Barb's house guests and conduct the Saturday workshop in the barn. The workshops accommodate about eight learners plus the faculty. The faculty are always joined in the hands-on supervision by members of the club who are relatively advanced turners. Predictably, the line between faculty and student blurs or disappears altogether as members pitch in to help one another through the project. This phenomenon is merely an extension of the camaraderie characteristic of our group and others whose principal goal is to learn by sharing, checking egos at the door. The sharing at Barb's goes beyond the turning; visiting faculty find themselves instant adoptees of their hostess. Barb's Barn doesn't begin or end behind the house. A commodious guest room, home-cooked meals, and all the comforts of home are routine amenities for visiting faculty. There is such comfort and warmth that the sense of adoption, as Bob Rosand has put it, goes in both directions. Just as faculty and student distinctions blur in the barn, guests become indistinguishable from family during their stay.

Ordinarily we will have ten turners



Barb offers guidance to a young student at one of the chapter's workshops

in the barn. Participation is limited by space and availability of a lathe for each participant. Fortunately, through a grant from AAW, we have two portable lathes that are often stored at the barn when not on duty for community demonstrations and charity fund raisers. This minimizes the number of extra machines that have to be brought in. When the day begins all the essentials for a workshop are in place: faculty, tools, materials for the day's projects and a group of eager and grateful turners who will learn from equally enthusiastic faculty and, perhaps most importantly, help one another over the course of the day. Based on the experience of the faculty, projects will be selected that can be completed on site or brought to a stage that permits finishing at home.

A vital component of the session is the availability of people who can recognize a truly sharp tool and know how to get it that way. Among amateur turners, dull tools are more the rule than the exception. The turner who discovers for the first time the power of the light touch and fine edge is a convert for life. His own skills may require sharpening continually but he will never lose his preference for curls of shavings instead of clouds of dust.

So Barb's Barn continues to build skills among those who wish to grow. Again it resembles baseball in that the greater the pool of talent the broader

the interest and finer the talent of those who rise to the top. The idea is basic and the consequences potentially immense as programs such as this multiply across the country. Meanwhile, in the Buffalo area, there's no question about how it works. To those of us who take advantage of this simple but powerful program it's especially clear. But, like all good ideas, however simple, the devil is in the details of implementation. Here we have an extraordinary advantage. Her name is Barbara. Ordinarily the lone woman in the club would be adopted and perhaps slightly patronized by the male majority. Barb never had that experience, nor did we. Whether it might have happened we'll never know because she quickly assumed a special position by providing an integral component of what all such associations are really about — the opportunity to learn, to teach, and to grow through sharing.

A French philosopher once said: "the only thing we'll clutch in our gnarled hands at the moment of death is what we've given away." Barb knows this instinctively and behaves accordingly. The rest of us learn it more slowly but its truth is compelling.

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