

Resident brings 18th-century woodworking to life in modern day Western Reserve

by Nikki Custy

For the past 40 years, Richard Grell has been designing and building museum quality Windsor chairs on the Hudson farm where he grew up. Today, the local renaissance man shares his craft with others in a barn he built on that same family farm. The barn, completed last spring, serves as Richard's workshop and woodworking school.

"Rich's students really enjoy being in that space," said Gay, his wife and business partner. "Even when they are finished working for the day they stay and chat. There is such a feeling of camaraderie."

Grell has been judged as one of the finest craftsmen working in the style of 18th century America today and was inducted into the Country Living Guild in 2003. Grell's chairs have been shipped all over the world and the business, R Grell Designs, that he runs with Gay, has brought the Grells into contact with world-famous musicians, actors and CEOs, including Martha Stewart.

"I've always been fascinated by the Windsor," Grell said. "I am still amazed that a chair so delicate could be so strong."



Hudson resident and craftsman Richard Grell (right) teaches workshops for those who want to learn how to make classic Windsor chairs.

Grell's chairs have been featured in countless publications including *Country Living*, *Popular Woodworking*, *Architectural Digest*, *Early American Life*, and *Time Life Books*.

Grell is no stranger to teaching, but for many years he did not have much time for it since he and Gay were traveling all over

the country showcasing their chairs at high-end artisan shows.

"My first Windsor chair-making class was in 1975 and was very rewarding," Grell said. "I knew teaching was important to me. I guess you can say I was the first to teach Windsor chair-making since the craft was lost. Demand for my Windsor chairs interrupted my teaching career."

Now Grell teaches many different classes

out of his barn such as furniture restoration, aged paint finishing, woodworking hand tool restoration, as well as guiding students through cutting and shaping four types of wood to build their own Windsor chairs: tulip poplar for one-board chair seats, white ash for spindles,

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maple for legs and stretchers, and oak for bendings. Under Grell's tutelage, even a woodworking novice can be successful in crafting a chair that will be a focal point in a home.

"Sometimes it is hard for people to get over that hump and realize, 'Wow I really can do this,'" Gay said.

One of Grell's most popular woodwork-

ing classes is the three-day "child's hoop-back Windsor armchair" class. He said a lot of grandparents take the class to make a gift for a grandchild that can be passed down through the generations. Once a student completes a class they can come back again and again to make a chair for half price.

"About 90 percent of my students take me up on this," Grell said. "It basically covers the price of the wood."

Grell's love of woodworking was nurtured from a young age by his grandfather.

"My grandfather did not believe in toy tools," Grell said. "He polished and sharpened antique tools to give to me as birthday gifts. I still use tools today to make my living that I received when I was 4 years old."

By age 12, Grell knew that working with wood was what he wanted to do. However, well-intentioned adults around him told him it would be a better hobby than a career.

"My father said 'make a living with your mind and not your back,'" Grell said.

After graduating from Hudson High School, Grell went on to study at the Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics. Hard working families, he said, always encourage their kids to reach higher.

"In their mind they want you to have a better life; but their hard work, strength, and 'do it yourself' example give you the ability to handle life's challenges without them ever having to say a word," he said.

For the Grells, life's challenges included building a business, and a home, from the ground up. The Grells live in an authentic Connecticut colonial that they themselves built in 1977. Gay said the home took two years to build and is modeled after "incredible period homes" in Connecticut, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Like many things in this self-made couple's life and business, the home was designed by Gay and built by Richard. He credits her as "the world's most talented" designer and detail person. For her part, Gay said: "How lucky am I that what I can dream up, my husband can build."

For more information about R Grell Designs or to see Richard's woodworking class schedule, visit richardgrell.com. ∞



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