



Wonderful Woodwork

Patt Gregory, the creator of Woodwork for Women, talks about her journey from practitioner, to teacher and mentor, and the thrill of working with wood.

Q: What set you on the path of becoming a woodwork teacher for women?

A: If I told you it was partly because I'd been working as a private detective would you believe me?

Q: That's a bit of a career swap!

A: Well, I'm Australian, but my ex-husband was from the UK. In 1984 we were living over there in Bristol, and I'd been working as a private detective, but it really didn't suit me. You've almost got to become a criminal to catch one – you have to lie and be deceptive. It's not a job with a lot of integrity which is important to me. Anyway, I saw an advertisement for a woodworking class. I joined it, and I just loved it, so I went further and decided

to train as a carpenter/joiner. I learned everything from how to build the framework for a house, make a staircase, to dovetail joints in cabinetmaking, but as I went through the course it became really clear to me that I didn't have the basic knowledge of the tools and terminology that the male students had, and my teacher was reluctant to spend time explaining to me what was obvious to them.

Q: Was that frustrating for you?

A: Initially, yes, until I began to understand how it all worked, and it was during that course that it first occurred to me that I would really love to empower other women to be able to make objects out of wood. In 1985 I was given the opportunity to set up

a government funded women’s workshop in Bath, teaching woodwork to unemployed women over 25. It was incredibly rewarding, and I helped a lot of women to either become teachers themselves, or to start their own business. Weirdly though, I didn’t see it then as a lifepath, and when Mike and I moved to Melbourne I did something completely different.

Q: What was that?

A: I’d had my first child then, my daughter Holly, and I really wanted a job where I could keep her with me. I didn’t want to put her into day-care or be separated from her, so I decided to start a business, and I opened an upmarket second-hand children’s shop, with high quality equipment and clothes in. It was very successful, but I began to feel quite lonely in Melbourne. It was hard to make friends, and around that time Mike came up to Mullumbimby to do some work, and fell in love with it. He came back and suggested that we move here, and so we did. We rented a house up here 28 years ago, and I’m still renting it! Mike and I went on to have another daughter, Lilee, and although we separated we’ve both continued living up here and stayed friends. The house has this great annex with a lot a light in, and when I saw it I immediately thought what a great space it was for woodwork workshops. I wondered if the local women would like to learn woodwork, and I set up a pilot course under the NEIS (New Enterprise Incentive Scheme) and the Woodwork for Women courses were born. Since then, I’ve taught woodwork to thousands of women.

Q: When you began there weren’t that many women



Patt Gregory showing students how to use hand tools

studying ‘trades’ – why do you think you were drawn to woodwork?

A: I grew up on a dairy farm with two brothers, and of course it was just expected that they would go out and have fun with knives and guns and all those boy things, and I would learn ‘home’ skills, but I was really jealous of all the time they got to spend outside doing stuff, and I was drawn to the idea of making things from an early age. When I was five I snuck into my stepfather’s shed and borrowed his hammer and I spent several hours wandering around trying to whack four-inch nails into the shed door, the laundry window frame and the concrete foundations!

Q: That was ambitious...

A: I wanted to build an entire tree house, so I dragged planks of wood up into the wide flowering branches of our wattle tree and tried to nail them to the branches. Then I pushed and pulled our farm dog up on to the wobbly boards, and together we surveyed the paddocks. If I’d been a boy I’m sure I would have been shown how to hold a hammer and told that four-inch nails have limited uses. Instead I was sent inside to help mum bottle the blackberry jam. Discovering woodwork later in life I found it was a calm and beautiful thing to do, and that I could drop into a deep meditative state while I was doing it. In the early days it was

all hand tools, and now of course, there are power tools, which have also made woodwork much more accessible to women.

Q: In what way?

A: There’s always been a myth that you must be strong to do woodwork, and of course you don’t, but power tools are incredibly accurate and do really delicate work, so women find it a revelation when they can use them so easily.

Q: I think, for me, I would find having to be very exact with the measurements hard – is there any bit of doing woodwork you find difficult?

A: Yes! The measuring. I’m dyslexic, and I’ve learned that

I can measure something 300 times, and think it’s right, but if I take a short break and go back I’ll find the very next time it’s actually wrong, and if it’s out by even one millimetre it’s going to make a difference. I’ve also discovered recently that I have dysphaxia, which is a condition where you’re not very co-ordinated, so doing what I do hasn’t been easy, but it also means I have a lot of empathy when women find it difficult.

Q: Are there some women who take to woodwork more easily than others?

A: Over the years I’ve found that the women who understand woodwork most easily are women who sew – because they

get how important the precise measuring is, and they already have an understanding of it. As I gradually refined my teaching process what I realised was that I didn’t have a deep personal desire to make beautiful pieces of furniture, or works of art, I wanted to make, and to teach others to make, practical pieces with clean lines. I wanted, and want, to set women up to understand they can make a shelf, a cupboard, or a table, and then it’s up to them, they can take it from there. What I’ve become really interested in now is how to teach the teachers.

Q: That sounds like a natural progression...

A: It’s a very important progression for me. I’m 70,



Helping build a tiny house for a homeless person



Measuring accurately is an essential skill in woodwork



Learning to use power tools is very rewarding



The tiny house in construction

and I'm trying to work smarter not harder. I wrote my first book *Woodwork for Women*, self-published it, and it was successful. What I've realised is that the next stage of this journey is to train female woodwork teachers, so to that end I'm writing another book, which is a guide to women who want to transition from woodworking to teaching. I'm thinking of something like, 'The Woodwork for Women Way'. I want to reference the previous book, because it's done well, and it's well known. I'd like this teaching book to have a journal element to it, with exercises, and space for women to write in, so that's what I'm currently working on.

Q: You've lived in Mullumbimby for 29 years now – how important is community to you?

A: Community is everything. I moved here because I needed to connect to a community and having been here for so long and doing what I do I'm often part of community projects. I was part of a local team that built a tiny

home for a homeless person, and of course, what I discovered from that wonderful project was that it was about much more than putting a roof over someone's head, no matter how important that is.

“If I'd been a boy I'm sure I would have been shown how to hold a hammer and told that four-inch nails have limited uses.”

Q: You've written quite a few pieces for different magazines, but even now there's still disparity between the number of men to women who are writing about woodwork, isn't there?

A: Unfortunately, yes. I think one of the things that's happened in modern times is that it's much more common now for people to get tradies in to do everything when they're renovating or building. Once, for example, even if women weren't necessarily doing the building, they were involved with the painting. Even young boys are not necessarily learning those basic carpentry skills from their fathers anymore, because what's the need if you can buy furniture so cheaply? But of course, the satisfaction that comes from making your own furniture, or building a chook house, or a tiny home, or renovating your house, or building a house is truly priceless. And everyone, boys and girls, men and women, should have access to learning how to do woodwork. Both my daughters, Lilee and Holly, can do woodwork, although they've taken different career paths. Lilee, who is 27, and lives in Melbourne, has become a very creative florist. She runs her own business, Astrodaphne, and recently she was thrilled to be chosen from all

the florists in the world to create the flowers for the Golden Globes celebration reel, and Holly, who's 35, was a singer for many years before she decided to work in the corporate marketing world, and she lives in Sydney. They're both very independent women. I've always got on with young people, and when I was in my mid-forties I became a counsellor, because quite often women need a space where they can talk safely. It taught me to listen deeply, and as the woodwork courses unfolded I started to mentor some of the young women. I'm mentoring five young people at the moment, and I find it very rewarding.

Q: Have you always just taught women?

A: No. Although I predominantly teach women, it's not exclusive. Men have also come to the classes over the years, and I've run classes for children from the age of four to fifteen. I had one six-year-old boy, Felix, who came for one-hour lessons once a week

after school for several months and made his own workbench.

Q: What is it that makes woodworking a mindful process for you?

A: When I teach, I talk to people about their breath. People often forget to breathe when they're working, they're so busy concentrating, but of course focusing on the breath is a way to relax, and it's important to help them concentrate on all the sensory aspects of what they're doing. A lot of people get caught up in being 'good' at woodwork, but if you're irritated with yourself you'll never enjoy it – or anything for that matter – so being very present, and tuning into your emotions is important. Everyone makes mistakes and our mistakes are how we learn, but it's also vital to be safe, so woodwork by its nature is therefore mindful. You focus on the work, which brings you into alignment with your brain and your body, and I think that's why I find it so endlessly interesting and intoxicating.

Q: What do you think it is about working with wood that attracts you?

A: I love the spicy wood fragrance, the song of the saw, and those tiny golden curls of pine as you plane a piece of wood. I find shaping and taming the wood incredibly satisfying. Even the pitch of the saw changes as you near the end of the cut, and then you can run your hand along the grain of the freshly cut wood. But beyond that I love the meditation in the work, how each project and the way to the finished product is unique, and I'm just as passionate as ever about guiding people through the growth of their

project, because I know it's also a journey for the 'self'. I may not be a five-year-old banging in the wrong nails with my stepfather's hammer, but I still have that irresistible child-like urge to work with wood. ■