

Tim Lee Cuts Through Obstacles

When people enter Tim Lee's townhouse in Milton, Ontario, they immediately notice a beautiful cherry-wood table displayed in the family room. It's carefully polished and clearly stands out as the showpiece of the home. Lee is proud to show the table to his guests, because it's a piece that he made himself. The 37-year-old husband and father of three says, "When I finished it, I was really amazed. I still look at it sometimes and think, 'wow, what an accomplishment.'" Lee never imagined that he would be able to make such a stunning piece of furniture. Before starting, he knew fine woodworking would be a difficult challenge, and even more of a challenge for him. Lee has had to learn the craft of woodworking with only one arm.

It sounds like mission impossible, but this Milton tow truck driver has lived with a disability his whole life. Challenges come with the territory. Lee says, "You don't know what you can do until you try it." Equipped with this stellar attitude, Lee has taken on the many challenges of woodworking as they've come along.

He took his first crack at woodworking after many visits to his father-in-law's home. "He's always working with a piece of wood," says Lee. "One day I said 'give me a piece of that and let me try something.'" After making a few picture frames and such, he wanted to take a step further and build a wall unit.

Once Lee discovered that he enjoyed working with wood, he immediately wanted to learn the proper skills to make furniture. His first challenge was to find an instructor that would take him on. Once people learned of his disability, they came up with reasons why they couldn't instruct him. "It's not that people are being rude," says Lee. The attitude is more like 'Gosh... I'd like to help you, but I can't.'

Fortunately, someone was willing to help Lee turn his interest in wood into a full-fledged hobby. His name is Hendrik Varju, owner of Passion For Wood in Acton, ON (and contributing editor to Canadian Woodworking Magazine). When he heard Lee's story, he agreed to take on the eager student.

Still, working with a prosthetic, rather than a hand, was no easy task. Varju and Lee had to come up with techniques for working with the machines. For instance, when running the lumber through the jointer, the proper technique is to push the lumber through and over the cutterhead,

keeping the lumber moving with your hand. Instead, Lee holds a push pad with the prosthetic to move the lumber through. Another challenge was using the hand-plane, which is technically a two-handed procedure. Lee says, "I have to hold it with my right hand and apply pressure with my prosthetic."

Varju says fine woodworking can be intimidating for any beginner. Even if people have worked with wood in the past, there is a definite learning curve. The willingness to learn is the most essential tool. Varju says, "Lee doesn't come to the table assuming he knows everything. He's open to learning. That's how every student should start."

Now, only two years since he started woodworking, Lee has already built his own workshop in his garage. He has equipped it with a table saw, drill press, jointer, planer, router, router table, and all kinds of other tools. He is currently working on a cherry wood TV stand and has a lot more projects planned. Since he has started to pursue his interest in woodworking, he has let nothing get in his way of becoming a better woodworker.

Think that there are obstacles to you becoming a better woodworker? Think again!

LAURA MORRIS

