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Greenville Woodworkers Guild member Herb Ireland gets a suggestion from nationally known Charleston woodcarver Mary May during a class at the guild's new, 24,000-square-foot facility in Mauldin.

Woodworkers build interest in craft

New education center expands guild's mission

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Comstock

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Membership in the Greenville Woodworkers Guild is \$120 a year. Find out more by going to www.greenvillewoodworkers.com.

ly warm environment.

The new facility allows the guild to offer its members and the public an expanded range of classes and seminars, including a youth program that will launch in April. And for guild members, the workshop provides access to an extensive selection of

Within a matter of weeks after the Greenville Woodworkers Guild opened its new, 24,000-square-foot facility off West Butler Road in Mauldin, people started stopping by. In December, the guild gained 40 new members. For those members who recalled the uncertain days when the guild had only 40 members, it was a milestone moment.

"It's wonderful," says Wayne Comstock, the guild's president.

When you walk into the new workshop in the heart of Mauldin, the gentle buzz of saws and sanders and chatter melds together. The smell of fresh wood fills the air, and it's a surprising-



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A guild member turns wood on a lathe during a class. The new center will allow for more classes and seminars.

tools, ample storage, reduced wood costs and willing teachers.

To longtime members, the center is the most recent development in a logical evolution. Each year taught something new. The current education center and shop couldn't have existed without the past 30 years.

"We didn't know how to run a shop then," says

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Aubrey Rogers, sitting in the guild's new boardroom. "I don't think we would have been very successful opening up this building then. We had a big learning curve."

The Greenville Woodworkers Guild started from a kitchen table conversation in 1981. Organizers had three goals: to promote the art of woodworking, to provide woodworking education and to perform charitable activities.

In those days, guild members would hold how-to seminars in their home workshops, where 14 people would squeeze in to learn how to use a lathe or how to turn a bowl. After the guild flourished in the mid-90s, a member stepped into the role of benefactor, donating his shop full of tools, which raised \$7,500 through auction, "three times our annual budget," Rogers jokes.

The donation included use of a 6,000-square-foot space on Poinsett Highway. The guild's first home wasn't perfect, but it unified the guild and made it possible for the group to offer seminars and classes.

"There was a place where people could go and learn instead of building in individual shops," Comstock says. "That facility allowed the guild to reach out. As soon as folks started using that facility, more people heard about it."

Many members are retired folks who have always had an interest in woodworking, while others grew up watching a father or grandfather. Some want help with specific home projects and others want to create pretty things, Comstock says.

Jim Sinclair, the group's communications manager, joined last year after a lifetime of "dabbling" in wood projects.

"I didn't have the tools, I didn't know what kind of tools to buy, I didn't know what kind of wood to use for projects, and there was no other place to get that information besides Internet, read a book or go somewhere where people have that experience," says Sinclair, who is semi-retired from advertising. "I was looking for experienced people."

Among the guild's woodworkers, there is a sense of respect for the creation process, coupled with a desire to share it with others, says Rogers.

More than 300 members donated in excess of 800 volunteer hours to renovate the new complex. The demolition, clearing and repair of a retention pond, construction of 14-foot-high gypsum board walls, floor repair and painting



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Greenville Woodworkers Guild teacher John Riordan, right, works with member John Eichenberger at a lathe. The guild gained 40 members in December.

work saved an estimated \$280,000.

"I think the tendency is people who are woodworkers probably their whole lives have just helped other people do things," says Jim Kilton, a retired engineering manager for Cryovac who joined the guild in the mid-80s. "So it's probably a natural extension of their ability."

Over the years, members have made hundreds

of toys, special desks and chairs, ramps and cabinets for almost 40 local nonprofits, including the Meyer Center, the South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind and A Child's Haven. Charity has become such a big part of the Greenville Woodworkers Guild that the Hollingsworth Foundation recently took notice, awarding the guild a \$2,500 grant.

"The head of the founda-

tion was amazed that we do all we do," Comstock says. "He said, 'You do all the work for the people we give money to.'"

Next week at the new center, a lathe class will be held in one of the large classrooms. There is room enough for 14 people, and for now, the days of squeezing in are over.

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