

Dan Brown—the work of a perfectionist

By Scott Laird

Dan Brown is a perfectionist. Ask anyone who has worked closely with him on a community project. Or ask anyone who has served with him on a city committee. Or talk to anyone who has had him install a kitchen. Or ask Dan's wife, Heidi, if Dan is a perfectionist. "Oh my goodness, Yes!" says Heidi Brown, "Dan is VERY detail-oriented."

Dan and Heidi Brown are the owners of the Grey Dawn Gallery on Bridge Street in Vernonia. They also run Hardwood Originals, a furniture and cabinet shop, located in the back of the gallery. Dan is the woodworker, Heidi manages the gallery but is often found helping in the workshop with sanding and oiling. When I went to talk with Dan about his work, what I wanted to know was, "Do you consider yourself a woodworker, a craftsman, or an artist?" In lieu of a straight answer, Dan said "I'm a perfectionist."



Dan notes he's always been interested in crafts. He really got involved while taking wood shop in high school, and his talent must have been evident. Shop teacher Terry Nimz hired Dan to build cabinets for him during the summer. He graduated from Vernonia High School in 1978 and received a Bachelors Degree in Religious Education from Prairie Bible Institute, located in the tiny town of Three Hills, about 30 miles north of Calgary, in Alberta, Canada.

When asked if he considers himself an artist, Dan hesitates, then replies "Yes, in my design and in my construction. It helps that people tell me they think so." I then asked how he gets his ideas. "An artist is often inspired by something else," he said, "whether something from nature or their surroundings. So you take what you know and make something different. I get a lot of inspiration from outside myself."

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Paying close attention to detail is what separates a woodworker from a craftsman. "You start out trying to do your best. You realize you're a craftsman when people start saying it. You compare yourself to other people's work, and then you know how good you are," Dan said. "There are plenty of people out there doing amazing work, much better than what I do." Dan's also very modest, as his work is truly that of a seasoned craftsman.

Dan has certainly evolved his craft since those early days, and lately has been inspired by a style called Intarsia, that he first noticed at craft and furniture shows. Intarsia uses sculptured pieces that are cut with a jigsaw, then fit together to create three dimensional pictures. Although they are often used as wall hangings, Dan prefers to create functional pieces instead, like dressers and tables.

Dan doesn't always get to use his skills as art, especially in the kitchens and cabinets he designs and builds. However, some kitchens do take some real artistic work. "People who've



had Dan install a kitchen for them refer to them as a Dan Brown Kitchen," says Heidi. Often, if they move, they call up and say, "We must have our Dan Brown Kitchen in the new house!"

The idea for the Gallery began through Dan's work on the City Planning Commission. Through this appointment, Dan had the opportunity to attend a "Livable Oregon Conference". One of the sessions was about multi-use buildings in downtown corridors which inspired thoughts of moving their shop to Vernonia.

Dan discussed the idea of the gallery with his friend and then-local artist/photographer Christopher Burkett. "We thought, why not a gallery in Vernonia?" said Dan. The gallery was launched in a multi-use space, part gallery/part workshop, and featured local artists – Christopher Burkett, Jeff Patterson, and Dan's sister Ruth Brown, as well as Dan's woodworking pieces.

The Browns started Hardwood Originals in Manning next to the Village Market in 1987. They moved to Vernonia in 2000 into their current location on Bridge Street. The new location became a big project. They first attempted to renovate the existing structure which was originally Bergeson's Hardware, and then Nichol's Variety store. "It was a mess," Dan said. "We tried to salvage some of the original

lumber from the structure. There were just too many problems." They finally decided they needed to rebuild from the ground up.

Now Dan splits his work between kitchens and furniture and has a year and a half to two years' wait list for his services. He knows he won't be able to do woodworking forever. It's very hard, physical work, but both Dan and Heidi are looking forward to increased business with their gallery.



Dan and Heidi have had a long-term vision for the downtown core, and have high hopes for the future of Vernonia. With the opening of Stub Stewart State Park and the Bicycle Skills Park, they expect an influx of visitors to the area and an increase in gallery traffic.

In addition to being a craftsman and business owner, Dan is

very involved in the community and at home. He's chairman of the Planning Commission, has been instrumental in the planning of the Bicycle Skills Park, and almost single handedly completed the Archway Project – the installation of the two metal archways at the entrance to the pocket parks on Bridge Street. Dan is also an elder at his church and father of two teenagers.

Dan has been known to leave committee meetings in the late evening and head back to his workshop to finish a project. So, when you see the lights burning late at night in the Browns' workshop behind the Grey Dawn Gallery, know that a perfectionist's work is never done.

The Grey Dawn Gallery is located at 879 Bridge Street and is open Monday-Saturday, 10am-5pm.