

# ALAN LACER

*Honors for ex-president, teacher and friend*

DICK BURROWS

EVERY ORGANIZATION THRIVES BE-  
cause of unassuming people  
who are often overlooked. They  
quietly share their gifts, but don't de-  
mand anything in return.

In the AAW, one of the quiet ones  
is Alan Lacer, who was recently cited  
by the AAW Board of Directors and  
named this year's honorary life mem-  
ber.

No one deserves the honor more,  
friends and colleagues say. They de-  
scribe Alan as bright, unassuming,  
gracious, self-effacing. Also, a tal-  
ented turner, gifted teacher and orga-  
nizational wizard. He needed all  
those talents as the AAW's second  
president, when the fate of the fledg-  
ling organization was in doubt.

And, now that the organization is  
healthy and growing, he continues to  
share his talents, especially as a  
teacher. Many in the AAW credit his  
work with helping them find the joy  
in turning. That's about the greatest  
gift one turner can give another.

## **Gary Roberts recalls dark days:**

S. Gary Roberts, who was named  
an honorary life member at last year's  
Akron symposium, remembers Alan  
from the AAW's early days.

"He took over as President when  
the association was having a lot of  
problems. He was President longer  
and through more difficult times than  
hopefully any following President  
will ever encounter. Through all of  
this he exhibited true leadership with  
a smile and diplomacy.

"His leadership has helped to form  
the association into the successful,  
mature organization that it is today. I  
can think of no other more deserving  
candidate for this most prestigious  
honor."

Alan downplays his role. "A lot of  
people did so much that I'm probably  
getting credit for. Looking back, there



Ever an ambassador for AAW, Alan demonstrates in Naruko, Japan. His teaching and writing have taken him throughout the US, and to Japan, Germany and several other countries.

was so much good energy. Sometimes  
an organization's time of adversity  
provides its best moments. People  
stayed and worked and that was ex-  
citing."

## **David Ellsworth remembers:**

David Ellsworth, the first president  
of the AAW, still credits Alan for  
major help in getting the AAW going:

"Starting up an organization such  
as the AAW is never easy, and our  
first five years proved that point. We  
achieved many successes because we  
had great people on the board who  
were talented, highly motivated and  
full of energy. But we also had to  
change administrators three times in  
the first five years, and these disrup-  
tions to our mission were certainly  
agonizing. These were the circum-  
stances when Alan was selected from  
the board to succeed me as president  
in 1991, and he proceeded to become  
the calm within the storm.

"Among the many qualities Alan

brought to the office, possibly the  
most important were his innate abili-  
ties to listen, to learn, and to ask. As  
such, every person and every per-  
son's opinion mattered. As a director,  
he would help the board focus on cur-  
rent goals as a foundation for reach-  
ing future potentials; as a manager, he  
would encourage each member of the  
board to explore their own experi-  
ences and use their own talents as a  
resource for getting the job done." Also,  
David said Alan took on the job of  
"conference coordinator," visiting  
each site to negotiate the terms for the  
conference, plus working with the  
many Local Chapter members who  
would provide logistical support for  
these annual events.

"Under Alan's stewardship, the or-  
ganization grew in membership and,  
for the first time, went from red to  
black. Thus it was through Alan's  
leadership that we gained the neces-  
sary confidence and stability that  
would become the foundation for the

growth we see today. "

### **Bob Flexner praises friend**

Alan's administrative efforts have long been apparent. "Alan and I have been friends and neighbors for 22 years—from the time we started doing woodworking in home shops about three blocks from each other," says Bob Flexner, noted wood finishing authority. "I watched Alan progress from woodcarver to accomplished woodturner and teacher, but most impressive to me was his skill as an administrator, which he used so effectively to build the AAW into the dynamic organization it is today. Alan is too modest to take credit for what he did, but clearly, others in the organization recognize it. The AAW couldn't find a more deserving person to be "man of the year."

High praise for a philosophy major who, embarking on a path to a comfortable college faculty life, took what would become a life-long detour into the rockier landscape of turning.

### **Philosopher at the lathe**

What could a philosophy student find so fascinating about a lathe?

"It's the simplest tool in the shop, but also the most complex in what happens between the two major points: the headstock and tailstock."

"And when the tools sing, it comes very close to poetry."

Alan drifted into woodturning by accident. He learned to carve from an old guy in Oklahoma and that helped mellow out the rigors of academia. The same guy introduced him to turning as he worked on a small baseball bat. "I turned away for a minute and when I looked around it was done. The bat magically appeared and I liked that," Alan says.

Carving was tedious and it didn't fire him up the way the magic of the lathe did. "There was nobody I could learn from, so I just stumbled along. It's tough to learn all by your self.



Alan and his friend Del Stubbs working together years ago, probably in the old shop at Arrowmont School of Crafts in Gatlinburg, TN.

That's why the AAW symposiums are so important today," Alan says.

His excitement grew as he discovered other turners. Among the first were David Ellsworth and Del Stubbs. "It was unbelievable what they could do." They remain inspirations, as does Bob Stocksdale, Todd Hoyer, and Virginia Dotson.

"They were experimenting. That's what I wanted to do. I was never aiming to do high-end stuff."

As a philosopher, he was very concerned with maintaining a balanced life, harmoniously blending every component. "I never wanted to do any one thing all the time. I learned enough from Plato and other great thinkers to know the value of combining study with manual work." The more I talked with Alan, the more I perceived that philosophy, with its emphasis on balance, relationships, development and analysis, is a good way to revitalize turning skills.

"Working on a lathe is just as difficult as working in philosophy. It's incredible the amount of thinking involved. It's not just trade work, idiot work," he says. "The subtleties of beauty; the way that what the English turner and philosopher David Pye called things that sing and things that are forever silent come together

with workmanship is incredibly exciting."

"You need both a sense of design and sense of workmanship. Do you care more if a house is built well or if it is well designed? I want both, but we can get obsessed with one end or the other. We lose if there is no balance."

Plus, he adds, you can never forget you've "got to make money to live. I like to travel and buy good fishing lures, but I never wanted to get so deep into turning or philosophy that I lost the love that fired me up initially."

For a while, Alan taught adult education classes in ethics, interpersonal relations, and conflict resolution. He might teach for a semester, then do nothing but woodturning and craft fairs for months.

"I loved woodturning. Just when things were starting to happen, my hands got so bad from Carpal Tunnel that they looked like they belonged to someone else. The doctor said, 'you're through turning.'"

"If I can't turn so much, I figured I'd like to be a good teacher. I realized how lousy it had been to learn by trial and error," he says.

He put his energy into teaching and eventually into the AAW. He

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wasn't even going to join at first, being a little suspicious of groups and accustomed to working in isolation, but Palmer Sharpless asked him to start a Chapter in Oklahoma.

Somehow it all worked out, he says, largely because living in Oklahoma was so cheap – he rented a whole house for \$65 a month.

"My poor dad. I think for years he thought I was doing something illegal because I didn't have a job. Seven years in college, two degrees and nobody could say what I did." A friend described Alan's money-making system as eight half-time jobs. Alan adds he did small engine repair on the side.

Unlike many AAW members, I've not known Alan very long. As I was struggling to capture the man, his old friends Del Stubbs and Rus Hurt nailed it for me-- both the man and his other passions, notably fishing.

### **Del Stubbs speaks out**

Del, himself a bit of a legend in the turning world says that "Long ago I needed to 'disappear' from the woodturning scene and regain my quiet

private life, thank you all. But, when I heard that Alan was being honored, I just had to say something.

"I've had the good fortune of knowing Alan since the 80's. He's mellowing well with age, slightly spalted around the edges. He's a beaut! There are two things that I've found to be absolutely dependable about Alan over the years...his one of a kind Oklahoma sense of humor, and without exception - that his first concern is for other peoples' welfare. Although I've never had the chance to see him teach, I imagine and hope that his depth of sincerity, and his care for people is known and appreciated, as well as his understanding of his craft.

"Humility is a funny word. It's mixed up with things like bashful and self deprecating - that's not Alan. His humility is the strong and rare kind. When he travels, he gives all he's got, and that's a lot, but I think he receives even more - the kind of receiving that is the best gift of all. To him - the insights, the attitudes, the humanity of the individuals and the people he en-

counters are of rare value, to be learned from. That's real humility. When individuals are approached with the kind of sincere respect and genuine interest that is Alan, they give of who they and their culture are. Sincere interest is the greatest way of honoring a person or a people. When Alan travels in the states or abroad, he returns not only with fascinating knowledge of subtleties of craft and artistic expression, but he also returns with a rare depth of insight of individuals and of cultures. It's good stuff! Find a way to ask of it, (something perhaps rarely done here) then listen with your mind and heart.

As much as he's appreciated as a good fellow, there's much much more beneath the surface to be learned from him. He's an ambassador in the most human sense of the word."

Del sums it up with a fishing metaphor: "Alan, you may practice catch and release, but you're a keeper. A tip of the hat to you!"

### **Rus Hurt Goes Fishing**

Another longtime friend, Rus

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## **A Teacher's Magic: Getting Everyone Fired Up About Woodturning**

A teacher should be an encourager, someone who gets you fired up about what you're doing, says Alan.

"If you love what you are doing, that's 90% of learning. If you have the love, you develop skills." The next step is to become your harshest critic. Then you'll develop."

He's got the knack of reaching people and teaching them the fundamentals they need to begin their lifelong apprenticeship, says John Hill, Alan's Teaching Assistant at Arrowmont recently. He said he always "truly enjoyed his gentle style and presentation. He was an excellent speaker and AAW ambassador."

At Arrowmont, "I really got a chance to know him and watch him

share with others his wisdom, skills, and passion for woodturning."

Two women students who had worked with Alan before "just loved him. He was so patient with them and would help them with their work and instill the confidence that made their experience at Arrowmont a true pleasure."

Alan tries to show students that opportunities for learning are everywhere. Learn to see. "There is real beauty in the world."

A lifetime of thought and work invigorate his advice: "Start making notes of things that grab you. If you can't draw, describe them." Beauty is "unbelievably difficult to make." Master your tools.

Be aware of details: the difference

between a piece that sings and one that lies silent is sometimes only a 1/16-in. Don't be paralyzed by the word design: think about what it should look like when finished. "Go more into explorations, for things that satisfy and don't satisfy."

Have faith in your own opinions. "Don't be easily satisfied. "Too many turners are hooked on the accomplishment aspect."

Put a finished piece where you can glance at it every time you walk by; the beauty and flaws become apparent after a while. "Don't say good or bad; ask how could it be better or done differently." Persevere. "In a lifetime, you can't exhaust woodturning's possibilities."

– D.B.

Hurt, has fond memories of Alan as they both worked with the AAW, their craft and mastering life.

They first met in the late 1980's. "I recall liking Alan immediately after hearing his voice on the phone...in those days AAW was basically administered and run over the telephone...on the line, he was reserved, listened well, and when he spoke, it was with, thoughtful respect, commitment, and a concern for consensus. I recall our friendship developing as did our shared experiences on the board. At conferences and annual board meetings we often roomed together.

We had much in common. The subject of what makes for a balanced life...of work and play, of fame and fortune, of being in the present while looking to the future, seemed to always end up being the ultimate thread of continuity which made up our conversations.

On the board, Alan, Bonnie Klien and I shared a common vision for what AAW was and should be. We worked very well as team players. Alan was, and still is, one that doesn't necessarily wave around his own flag to attract unnecessary attention to himself. When he does, as we all do, it is done in an unassuming, polite and respectful way; most often via a conduit with an educational premise, like teaching and writing. This does not preclude the fact that occasionally one still needs boots...especially when things get deep...as Alan is known to have a story or experience about most everything, and exceptional command of the "last" word. I know of few people who have given so freely of their time and energy to a club, and to friends. Both are very important to him. He works for them, and they work for him. He has found a formula which seemingly brings that sometimes vaporous "balance" in life, to his own life, his work, his play, and his life in general. This doesn't mean

that his life is any easier or any worse than the rest of us....it just means it is His life. I have always admired his energy, his drive, and his dogged perseverance to bring to fruition, his dreams and visions. We all benefit by his being out there poking around; just read the Journal. Alan is a fisherman. I remember once the old Okie came to the Northland to visit his board buddy. It was in the fall when the colors were at peak, the nights cool and frosty, and the days yet hot from a southerly drifting sun; the time when salmon run from the big lake they call "Gitchi Gummi" into the feeder streams which wander inland. Living a quarter mile from one of these trout streams has been one of the treats of residing in the distant rural Northland. We fished a lot for food in the early years of living up north. Getting outside was beside the point. We spent most of our days outside in the environment, in the woods, under the sky, in the wind. Going fishing for Alan was an adventure. Getting out and tromping along one of our northern streams is like guerrilla fishing. One hacks through banks of brambles and alder brush. The stream is narrow and full of snags. Mostly not suitable for fly casting...but more for drifting and dropping flies here and there...with hopes of a sudden strike. Might I remind you...Alan has rather short legs, rather stocky broad shouldered build...weaving in and out of thickets, dodging this and that while walking and carrying a fly rod can be challenging for the most nimble of us....for Alan it was a challenge. After a while he caught on ... no pun intended...we might have had a strike or two, but it didn't really matter ...



The other passion: depending on the day, it would be difficult to decide which is more important.

we were out there, fishing, thinking, BS-in' about this and that, soaking up the sun, listening to the river; being a small part of a moment in time. Alan and I like some of the same authors, like Robert Service, Wallace Stevens and Jack London, among others, like the big names in philosophy. That subject gets him going....he has a mind for names, theories, jokes, just about everything...he is like a walking encyclopedia. He can make a game out of anything...and loves the challenge of dreaming up stuff. Since the fish weren't hitting, the adventure switched to getting a hornet's nest out of cedar tree and into a garbage can without being stung. I could tell about the Okie, swimming in the big lake in Sept. in 10-12-ft. waves at 10 pm., or smoking cigars and drinking tequila in my shop.

Rus said he enjoyed reminiscing about his friend. "Alan is a bit of an enigma at times, a crisis manager at times, a rock of Gibraltar at times, a pillar of persevering epistle-ism at other times, and simply a man of many talents, and many dreams. May all his dreams come true."

*Dick Burrows is Editor of American Woodturner. Alan will receive his award at the Symposium banquet.*