

AAW's Invaluable Common Denominator

By Carl Voss

In her 16 years in the AAW office, Mary Lacer has been the stable rock connecting the AAW's storied history.

For the record, Mary Lacer is a skilled turner. Before she took a huge leap of faith and agreed to serve as the AAW administrator in 1990, her Red Elm Workshop was paying its bills, thank you.

She turned commission pieces. She participated in turning exhibits. "Her exquisite goblets really stood out," recalls long-time friend Bonnie Klein.

And what about the 16 years since then? Although her time in front of the lathe has diminished (she did co-lead two turning workshops last year at Marc Adams School), the AAW has wormed its way into practically every corner of Mary's life.

When the AAW board members selected Mary as the 2006 Honorary Lifetime Member, they picked a member who, by her husband's account:

- falls asleep in bed with a stack of chapter newsletters tumbling from her hands.
- hovers over the AAW as though it were her fourth child.



"The AAW," says Bonnie, "is No. 1. And she's been the one to keep it on the straight and narrow.

"Without Mary, we wouldn't be here today."

Practically broke

Ah, how volunteering can change your life. In January 1987, Mary organized the initial meeting of what became the Minnesota Woodturners Association. After serving two years as chapter president, she was elected to the AAW board in 1989.

When she began her board term in January 1990, little did Mary know of the serious problems this young organization faced. The records were in shambles; the AAW had 1,700 paid members yet was mailing journals to a list of nearly 4,000.

The AAW hemorrhaged money. A management firm, recalls former board member Bonnie Klein, "was running us into the ground." In addition to onerous administrative fees, the office moved four times in two states in a matter of just three years.

The AAW was practically broke. Something had to be done—and fast. And when the AAW board members looked for a fix, they selected a new board member to pull the organization together.

Just six months into her term, Mary resigned from the board and applied for the administrator job. Her background included office administration in two large Twin Cities legal firms.

Dick Gerard, AAW's treasurer at the time, recalls that there was no Plan B: "If someone with skills

"Mary has worked harder than anybody for the AAW. She's been the one to keep it on the straight and narrow. Without Mary, we wouldn't be here today."

—Bonnie Klein, former AAW board member and Honorary Lifetime Member



Left: Box elder hollow vessel, 7×10". "This was one of my first hollow forms, turned from a log I found along a railroad line. There were so many other great burls on the tree, but it was on railroad property. Damn!"

Below left: Mahogany bowl, 4×10". "The cone in bottom of this bowl is completely hollowed from the underside, which was a fun technical challenge to overcome."

Below: Cue ball, 1½×1½". "I bought a dozen cue balls at a salvage store and thought it would be fun to try turning alternative materials."



didn't step forward, there may not have been any option but to close the doors."

Living room office

Mary volunteered a 10x10' corner of her living room as the new AAW office; her kitchen table was the conference room. Journal back issues were stuffed into her overflowing garage. When Bonnie shipped 60 boxes of records from the previous administrators, Mary needed a shed for storage.

Bonnie recalls that Mary's pay was peanuts; Dick thinks the pay was peanuts with only a promise of peanut butter—something only a little better.

"Everything was so screwed up," Mary recalls. "Because we really weren't sure who had paid dues, I think we had five different

"We've changed boards, changed advisors, changed editors, moved, and reincorporated. But the one constant thread in the AAW's tapestry is Mary Lacer."

—Dick Gerard, former AAW treasurer and Honorary Lifetime Member

renewal letters and reminders the first year.

"My first question to Dick each time we talked was, 'What bills can we pay this week?'"

How tight were finances? "We pared all expenses to the bone and restructured everything. We agreed that for Mary to write a \$25 check, she needed my okay," Dick says. "It took the president's okay for a \$50 check, and the board approved every check over \$100."

For two or three consecutive months, there wasn't even money to pay Mary, although she was later reimbursed.

Her children grew up with David Ellsworth, Rus Hurt, Bill Hunter, and others calling her house almost daily. Amelia—the youngest, at eight—learned to stuff envelopes and lick stamps between homework assignments.

Digging out of a hole

By fall, the AAW had to take out a \$16,000 emergency loan just to keep going. Although Mary accepted this job to "keep track of members and pay bills," the responsibilities grew by leaps and bounds.

But through thick and thin, Mary stayed with it. "Over these 16 years," says former board member Linda VanGehuchten, "Mary

has been the AAW's common denominator. If she hadn't been there, I don't know if the AAW would be here today.

"She's really good on details and makes sure the AAW board does everything the right way."

By 1995, the AAW had outgrown Mary's living room. The first office was 500 square feet in an office building near Mary's home. In 1999, the AAW moved into a 1,500-square-foot office before finally settling into its current space in 2004 in the historic Landmark Center in downtown St. Paul. The Landmark office includes a 2,400-square-foot gallery, a vision Mary has had for years.

Symposium twins

For several years, Bonnie was the symposium chairman and Mary ran the registration and trade show. When they shared a room, sleep was a scarce commodity.

"We were trying so hard to go to sleep, but we kept talking about what we could do to make the symposium better," Bonnie

"The AAW is Mary's fourth child."

—Alan Lacer, husband, second AAW president, and Honorary Lifetime Member



Above: Box elder tri-corner bowl, 4×9". From the collection of Arthur and Jane Mason. "The Masons bought this bowl in a gallery out East. I was really excited to meet Arthur and Jane for the first time at the next AAW symposium."

Right: Mountain laurel box, 2×2". "Mountain laurel is one of my favorite woods because it turns like butter and takes finish well."

remembers. "The lights were off, and Mary would say, 'Oh, one more thing,' and we'd yak some more into the early hours. It was like a slumber party—fun and exciting. But not much sleep."

Proudest accomplishments

Slowly the AAW became solvent. Mary looks back at every membership milestone with pride. First, 5,000 members in 1994, then cracking the 10,000 threshold in 2003. When the Charlotte symposium bumped over 1,000 registered attendees in 2000, Mary had good reason to celebrate the achievement with volunteers.

But accomplishments go beyond numbers. "I've really enjoyed watching the collector base grow with the acceptance of



Above: Cherry goblet, 4x2". "After I had been turning for about 10 years, I started to concentrate on goblets."

"When Mary agreed to become administrator, we really didn't have a Plan B. It took a believer to make this work. Or else someone who didn't know it couldn't be done."

—Dick Gerard,
first AAW treasurer and
Honorary Lifetime Member

Previous AAW Honorary Lifetime Members

David Ellsworth.....	1992
Ed "Bud" Jacobson (deceased)....	1992
Dale Nish.....	1993
Rude Osolnik (deceased).....	1993
Melvin Lindquist (deceased).....	1994
Ed Moulthrop (deceased).....	1994
Bob Stocksdales (deceased).....	1995
Palmer Sharpless (deceased).....	1996
Al Stirt	1997
S. Gary Roberts.....	1998
Alan Lacer.....	1999
Robyn Horn.....	2000
Ray Key.....	2001
Nick Cook.....	2002
Bonnie Klein.....	2003
Dick Gerard.....	2004
Arthur & Jane Mason.....	2005

"Mary's years of hard work, her tip-of-the-tongue encyclopedic memory, and her sound advice have made her an invaluable member of this unique community of individuals."

—David Ellsworth,
first AAW president
and Honorary Lifetime
Member

woodturning," Mary says. "It's a significant accomplishment that woodturners now have a presence at SOFA (Sculptural Objects and Fine Arts) events. In some circles, we are now recognized with glass and ceramic artists."

Such recognition hasn't come without controversy.

Linda VanGehuchten, who championed exhibits while serving two board terms, appreciates the effort Mary poured into getting woodturning recognized among other decorative crafts.

"Mary gets it. She really understood the importance of exhibits and that there was a lot of different work going on besides traditional bowls and platters.

"Exhibits don't necessarily make money the first few years. But you

have to get the ball rolling. If you don't get out there, you'll never be accepted with the other crafts.

"We shared a vision and figured out a way to get it done. She was right with me in championing exhibits."