

Jean LeGwin

2018 AAW HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBER

Terry Martin

The AAW Board of Directors at its discretion confers honorary lifetime membership to persons who, in its judgement, have made extraordinary contributions to the American Association of Woodturners and the advancement of woodturning.



With around 16,000 members, probably the only generalization you can make about the AAW membership is that they all have an interest in woodturning. Beyond that, those who belong to this remarkable organization range from absolute beginners to the most successful professionals, from members who live only a few miles from AAW headquarters to those who live at the far ends of the earth. They include retired surgeons, active schoolteachers, farmers, office workers, would-be artists, “round and browners,” and more—all united by their love of turning. For a long time, I have wanted to write a story about one person who embodies the interests and values of AAW, but it is quite a challenge. How do you choose such a person? Does he or she need to be a good turner? A frequent volunteer? An active local chapter member? As is often the case, the answer was right under my nose.

I have known Jean LeGwin since we sat together years ago at one of the annual AAW Symposia. Jean is a small bundle of energy with a delightful twinkle in her eye, and it didn't take us long to recognize that we are kindred

spirits. Regular meetings at woodturning gatherings and visits to her home in North Carolina have guaranteed a lifetime friendship with her and her partner Peg. But Jean is a very modest person, so the depth of her commitment to the AAW only became apparent after I talked to many other people.

“Try it—why not?”

Jean's earliest memory of working with wood is of whittling when she was seven years old. She loved working with her hands and puts it down to the influence of her father: “He put himself through college by making furniture,” says Jean, “so he was very good with his hands.” Her father was a USAF officer who joined the military during WWII. Jean was born in 1944 in Wilmington, North Carolina. The family lived on various bases in many states across the U.S. and even as far away as Japan, so from the age of four, Jean remembers moving on average every two years. She says that on the bases there were “hobby shops” where personnel could indulge their interests: “You could do anything you wanted, like fix cars or build furniture. My father always encouraged me to help him and taught me to believe a

girl could do anything. He used to say “Try it—why not?” When I was about 10, I bought a used bicycle for \$5. I took it all apart, painted it, and put it back together. There were a few parts left over, but it worked! I gained confidence to try things I knew nothing about by doing things like that.”

Jean's military-base lifestyle ended when she went to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, in 1962 to study English. “I've always loved books,” Jean explains, “and I remember my first purchase from my allowance was a book. In all the years we traveled from base to base, I often had to leave things behind, but my books were the first thing I packed, and I still have that first book.” After graduating in 1966, Jean took a job representing publishers at book fairs, making a lot of contacts and gaining many insights into the publishing industry. In 1974, she set up a partnership with a friend in Austin, Texas, specializing in the design and production areas of publishing. This was followed by a period as a production manager in Boston for several years before she started her own design and production company working with textbook publishers, university presses, and small publishing houses producing ▶

a wide variety of books and journals until 2003.

In 1980, Jean bought a house in Boston and decided to renovate it herself. With this experience gained, she then bought a bigger house and worked on every aspect of house renovation. “Taking a run-down house and turning it into something valuable is a very special feeling,” she says proudly. It was during this time that Jean first discovered woodturning. “I was at a woodworking supply store with Peg. Beth Ireland was there demonstrating woodturning, and while I was buying supplies, Peg enrolled us in a class. We turned a mallet, a pen, a box, the usual things that beginners do. It was the green-wood bowl that really hooked me—I loved the long ribbons of shavings. I thought, ‘I don’t care if I make anything, I just want to make shavings!’ Soon I bought a lathe and started turning in my unheated barn.” The energetic Jean soon enrolled in a woodcarving class with Janet Collins at North Bennet Street School in Boston. Janet told her about the AAW, so Jean joined and also became a member of two local AAW chapters, South Shore Woodturners and the Association of Revolutionary Turners.

Coming home

Jean retired in 2003, and in 2005 she and Peg moved back to Wilmington to care for her mother. They built a small house on land next to her parents’ home and beside that she built her dream workshop. “I remembered the cold in my shop in Boston, so air conditioning and heating were very important. I also wanted space, so my shop has a thirty-foot-square footprint. Because of all my years as a production manager, I am very conscious of workflow, so I have a big roll-up door for bringing wood right to my bandsaw, and I have a flexible layout with lots of natural light.” You only have to stand beside Jean’s lathe and look out the wide window to see how inspired

Seldom the one with the loudest voice in the room, Jean prefers working behind the scenes and creating structure for others to use.

Jean’s plan was—the vista is priceless. Jean soon became involved in the local AAW chapter, WAWA (Wilmington Area Woodturners Association), and for some time her shop was the venue for WAWA hands-on workshops.

Taking on bigger responsibilities

Jean’s energy is astonishing and on top of all her activities at home, she gradually became deeply involved in the administration of the AAW at a time when it was undergoing significant changes, as she explains: “While I was still in Boston, the AAW had put out a call for volunteer members to help archive the journal, *American Woodturner*. Because of my publishing experience, I volunteered for what turned out to be a very long and involved process that I didn’t finish until four or five years later. The best

thing was that it gave me a great chance to carefully read all the back issues, so I learned a lot about the journal, woodturning, and the AAW.” Jean’s quiet strength and wisdom were soon recognized and she was asked to run for the AAW Board of Directors. She was elected in 2006. “I stayed on the board for six years and was put in charge of publications. I looked at how the budget was being spent and realized AAW was not using their money efficiently, so after convincing the others on the Board that a reorganization would be beneficial, we were able to increase the number of issues per year from four to six—for less money! I suppose the journal archive and the journal reorganization were my most important achievements for AAW.”

While on the Board, Jean also served on several committees and was secretary for five of her six years of service. Since being off the Board, she has served as a Board advisor and became a founding and continuing member of AAW’s Women in Turning committee.

A dedicated turner

Jean is an active member of a high-quality co-op gallery in downtown Wilmington, and it has given her work a strong focus: “Members take turns at staffing the gallery, so communicating with the public has given me more



“You soon learn that subtle changes in form make all the difference.” —Jean LeGwin

Photo: Terry Martin



Jean’s use of color and patterns adds distinction to this trio of bowls.

insight into what works best. I am proud that I support the gallery and earn an income. What's more, it has helped me hone my skills, so I am confident I can make anything I want to." Jean picks up one of her superb pepper mills and says, "Production turning makes anyone more efficient by developing good tool skills, and you soon learn that subtle changes in form make all the difference. I'd advise any turner to find an outlet and see if they can start a process that ends up with regular sales. It gives focus to your work and structure to your day in the shop."

Like many production turners, however, Jean soon identified the pitfall for the unwary. "Even though it can make you more perceptive," she says, "it can also lead to a narrow way of thinking. Now I'd like to free up my brain a little and concentrate on the part that is more challenging for me—creativity."

On wood and turning

Jean explains why she is so happy working with wood: "Wood is a live thing and we are surrounded by it. You can work it in many ways and do so many things with it. The process of making is so compelling that I believe most people would jump at the chance to make something if they are given the opportunity. Just put them in front of a lathe and they will go for it! With turning you can make a product from start to finish in a reasonable amount of time, but it also teaches you to be careful because you can't put the shavings back on when you make a mistake—or should I say, when you create a design opportunity!"

Jean's success with the AAW has been based on much more than her undoubted skill as a turner. There is something else that touches her deeply, as she explains: "Woodturning is a solitary activity and I am an introvert, so it suits me. But the woodturning community is a sort of family and it brings people together from different walks of life. Being in woodturning has taken me to places I have never been before, and



A fine example of Jean's use of local spalted timber.



Jean understands the importance of perfect lines and good form. Her woodturning expertise is surpassed only by her dedication to the mission of the AAW.

I've made friends with wonderful people I never would have had the chance to meet. You get out of it what you put into it. At the local level, it's very direct—you get the chance to be mentored and to mentor others. If you have problems of any kind (wood, equipment, technique), put out a call and you will likely get an offer of help. With all the help available in the AAW and in local clubs, you can go from being a beginner to a competent turner in no time at all."

Sharing the energy

Jean never pushes herself to the fore, but after she became active in the Wilmington turning community, her wisdom and balance soon showed through: "As I became known as an experienced turner, people started calling for advice and I found myself passing on knowledge to those getting started. It has been both gratifying and humbling because I realize all the things I don't know and that there is usually more than one answer to every question. When I mentor people, I always encourage them to go to other people, too. I like to make sure that people learn the basics (beads and coves!) and learn to turn safely."

Reflections

When I asked Jean what woodturning has done for her, she thought long

and hard, and her answer was typically humble: "It's taken me way out of my comfort zone and contributed to my personal growth. Being on the Board and working in a local chapter have brought me out of myself in ways I never imagined. I am a quiet person and I don't like the spotlight. I learned I had to be extremely well prepared to achieve my goals." Seldom the one with the loudest voice in the room, Jean prefers working behind the scenes and creating structure for others to use.

It's easy to write about the big names, but it is those hard workers who don't seek the limelight who make the AAW what it is. Jean initially refused outright when I asked if I could write about her, and it took a lot of time to convince her that AAW members should know more about her. I had just finished writing this story, when I received the unexpected news that Jean LeGwin had been selected to receive the AAW's Honorary Lifetime Membership Award. I am so proud of my friend Jean, and I hope her story touches many in the AAW and that more of us find time to acknowledge the legion of unrecognized members who work behind the scenes. ■

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