

My Take: The Value of Handmade

Written by Jane Alexander, Editor-In-Chief
Tuesday, 22 December 2009 10:03



While unpacking moving boxes in my new house the other night, I came across one of my favorite things.

The sight of the big, old, heavy, wooden cutting board always makes me smile. Worn and scratched, it's graced more than a few kitchens over the years and seen plenty of service at the business end of a knife. I love it.

It's not just the carefully laminated maple and black walnut strips and softly curved, somewhat imperfect shape that touch my heart—*and remind me of another wonderful time in my life*. It's the inscription on one of the edges: "Merry Christmas 1983, Luke & Father Woodworkers."

We were living in Kingsport, Tennessee back then; our son Luke was almost five. I can still remember the flurry of conspiratorial winks and whispers that December, as he and his daddy periodically hurried down to the basement to work on their top-secret project. Moreover, I can still see the sparkle and the unmistakable pride in Luke's eyes as I unwrapped my beautiful cutting board that Christmas morning. He felt so good about having made something so special with his own hands.

The cutting board was just the start. Over time, Luke & Father Woodworkers were to collaborate on any number of other projects, some school-related, some not. Complicated LEGO structures, astounding paper airplanes, rooms full of origami, grandiose play-centers, catapults that used surgical tubing to launch balls farther and faster, balsa-wood bridges that supported more, more, more weight...

You name it. Around our house, something always seemed to be under construction—*Luke was constantly making things, then troubleshooting them when they didn't function the way he was expecting them to*

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. I guess I assumed that most kids grew up doing the same.

That's why it's been so disturbing to read about recent surveys conducted by actor, producer and author John Ratzenberger's Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs (NBT) Foundation (see page 34). In them, among other things, 58% of 1000 adults admitted to never having made a toy. With an eye toward encouraging youngsters to consider careers in manufacturing, NBT, in conjunction with the Fabricators & Manufacturers Association (FMA), sponsors activities that let kids realize—*early on*—the satisfaction that can come from working with their hands. The shortage in the skilled trades is an issue this magazine has been harping on for years. With statistics like the ones in the NBT surveys (of both teens and adults), I would say that NBT, FMA and all the rest of us still have lots to do in this area.

Encouraging and helping kids (be they our own sons and daughters or those of others) to make something with their hands—*not just use them to flip television remotes, send text messages and/or play computer games*—is a gift that keeps on giving. It's something that will benefit the recipients throughout their lives, regardless of the paths they choose or the cards they are dealt.

Luke was blessed. He chose and was able to go on to college and is now a successful IT professional. Although he really isn't working with his hands in the traditional sense, he's still building things—*amazing types of systems and architectures*. This Christmas, his son (my grandson) is almost five.

I trust the two of them are hard at work on their own son & father, made-by-eager-little-hands projects. The experiences they begin sharing today will pay off for a lifetime and beyond. **MT**

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jalexander@atpnetwork.com