

# Stopping By: Sight-impaired woodworker combines creativity, efficiency

By Starla Pointer, News-Register. Photos by Rusty Rae, News-Register. Used with permission of author.

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Graham Rankin knew he would need a hobby when he retired from full-time work as a professor of forensic chemistry. He chose woodworking, something he'd done from time to time since he was in graduate school.

Then he suffered a series of retinal tears, something that can happen to people who are severely nearsighted. In his case, the tears were extreme and, although he went through numerous surgeries, led to him being declared legally blind.

He never gave up on his hobby, though, and even began selling his wooden creations at craft shows.

And by working with the Oregon [Commission for] the Blind, the vision-impaired McMinnville resident learned ways to cope and received specialized equipment that makes wood-working easier and quicker and, therefore, profitable enough to be a successful small business.



Above, photo of Graham Rankin at his computer in his workshop.

Rankin, who has PhDs in analytical chemistry and oceanography, had several careers, including teaching forensic chemistry.

He retired in 2013 from Marshall University, where he trained graduates to work in crime labs investigating arson, explosives and the results of controlled substances.

He continues to work as an adjunct professor at Western Oregon University. In 2024, he will teach a class called "Forensic Science: Fact vs. Hollywood," using examples from "Breaking Bad," "Dexter," "CSI" and other shows.

Rankin was already interested in science when he was growing up in Texas. In junior high school, he chose an elective class about metals; looking back, he said he wishes he'd taken woodshop.

Instead, he taught himself to work with wood. While in graduate school, he worked as a picture framer in a craft store, honing his skills by framing the paintings of others and his own, as well.

Some of the art in the Rankins' McMinnville home today shows the results of what he learned as a framer. He still makes custom frames for artists, including one not long ago for a 105-by-51-inch painting; he had to finish the piece in his driveway, because it was too big for the workshop.

While in grad school, Rankin wasn't planning to become a teacher. In fact, he didn't teach until he was 40, since before that he thought he was too shy. "I grew into it," he said.

Instead, he did research as a geologic chemist for a large oil company. Eventually, he said, a "midlife crisis" took him back to school to qualify as a professor.

Even as he started his teaching career, he was thinking of retirement. "I had learned in the oil industry that guys who didn't have a hobby when they retired had a short lifespan," he said.

To pursue his nascent woodworking hobby, he turned his garage in Huntington, West Virginia, into a shop. He's done the same in McMinnville.

Wine cork trivets were among his first project. He made wooden frames and filled them with whole corks collected from visits to wineries, providing heatproof surfaces for hot pans.

He and his wife, Beth, often visited area restaurants, where they met chefs who appreciated the trivets. Rankin soon was making a variety of other wooden service items for restaurants, as well, including slim wooden clipboards that hold menus and wood holders for small cast iron skillets filled with hot, braised brisket.

At Beth's suggestion, he created a wood and cork tray designed to hold a 9-by-13 dish filled with lasagna. Long barrel staves became the basis for a charcuterie board.

He also started making personal wine trays. Each one has a slit for a glass along with enough space for a few appetizers — just right for someone to hold while standing. The user puts his right thumb through a hole in the tray to keep it secure.

When someone asked Rankin to make a tray for someone left-handed, instead, he simply turned it over. When someone else suggested the tray and glass felt too light, he offered another solution: "Add wine."

He also designed trivets embedded with corks that spell out names and dates.

He made one of the latter pieces using champagne corks to celebrate his own anniversary. It says "03-24-07 Graham and Beth."

Since he and Beth moved to McMinnville in September 2013, Rankin has continued to make cork trivets in addition to expanding his range of pieces. His favorite is a wall-mounted piece that holds two coffee cups and two wine glasses — he calls it the "AM/PM."

"I think every bed and breakfast should have one," he said.

He's also designed a guitar holder made from wine barrel staves and a cribbage board shaped like Oregon; variations come with Oregon State or U of O colors.

For Halloween and Christmas, he makes wooden lanterns, similar to paper bag luminaria.

He uses a computer-controlled router — one of his “toys,” as he calls his tools — to cut shapes in the front of each lantern, such as a star, a snowman or a Santa, etc. Battery-powered lights make the pattern stand out.

Some of his ideas come from friends, who mention something they would like and then ask, “Can you make that?”

“I say yeah, probably,” he said. “I make the first one, then I make more.”

Rankin, who will turn 77 on Thanksgiving Day, focuses on using excess and recycled wood — beech, walnut, hickory reclaimed cedar fencing, old barnwood, etc.

“Beth and I have had a desire to be more sustainable for years,” he said.

He often works with material he gets from a Tigard company that makes panels for butcher block cabinet tops and flooring. The company’s scraps or rejects provide plenty of material for Rankin’s projects.

“I buy it by the pallet full. I can cut around (any flaws),” he said.

His wine corks and barrel staves also are recycled. When he uses new wood, he chooses pieces that aren’t considered prime; he finds them on the discount rack.

Rankin is always on the lookout for useful materials, even though his vision is very limited.

Always “very nearsighted,” the retinal tears led to his vision loss, he said. “At first, I noticed my glasses were dirty. I cleaned them, and the problem didn’t go away,” he explained.

Surgery helped, at first. But after a cataract in his right eye was removed, doctors gave him a 1 in 3 chance of being able to see with that eye. “Now it’s my good eye,” he said, noting that he has some vision on that side.

He keeps three sets of glasses to give him the best possible sight: one for reading, one for distance; and one for using the computer. Each set has a different type of frame, so he can tell them apart.

He considers himself fortunate to be able to continue woodworking. “How do I do it?” he asked with good humor. “Very carefully.”

Being diagnosed as legally blind was helpful, in fact, he said. While it didn’t restore his vision, it “opened up so many doors,” he said.

He qualified for free services through the Oregon [Commission] for the Blind, receiving lessons about using a cane, climbing stairs and doing other everyday tasks.

He also qualified for a program to help him learn skills he needed for self-employment. The [Commission] for the Blind helped him create a business plan for his woodworking, do market research, create a website and formulate a budget.

A grant also paid for a computer-controlled router and laptop with software to make his work safer, as well as faster. The laptop controls his laser engraver, with which he can etch a drawing of a wine bottle, a company logo or other image.

Before he received some of the specialized equipment, Rankin cut and shaped items one by one — very time-consuming.

Now he is able to cut out several pieces at once. He can produce things more quickly, which makes it possible to make a profit by selling his work.

“Now in the time it took to cut one, I can do four,” he said, and soon he will install an upgrade that will let him do 12 at a time.

“I’m constantly thinking of what I can make and sell,” he said.

“Being able to take something like wood, start from scratch and design and make something useful using recycled materials ...” is very satisfying, he said.

Rankin, who calls his business “Creations by BG” for “Beth and Graham,” has sold his work at the McMinnville Recycled Art Fair and other local craft shows and events. Although he once felt too shy to teach, these days he loves to interact with potential customers.

He will sell his wares at the Wetzel Estate Winery show in Dallas over the Thanksgiving weekend. On Dec. 2 and 3, he will be at the Yamhill Valley Heritage Museum’s Handmade Holidays show.

Handmade Holidays will run from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 2, and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 3, at the Heritage Center, 11275 S.W. Durham Lane, just southwest of McMinnville. Admission is free with the donation of non-perishable food for the YCAP food bank.

He also has an online store through his website, [creationsbyBG.biz](http://creationsbyBG.biz).



At left: Graham Rankin’s products often make use of recycled materials, such as wine corks he mounts in frames to serve as trivets; he also makes wine holders that make it easy for people to carry a glass and some food; he uses a laser engraver to add logos or images to the trays.

At right: Always looking for materials to reclaim, Rankin cuts discs from a tree branch and turns them into laser-engraved ornaments.

