

Charleston Daily Mail | Mason County furniture maker turns derecho into decor

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Craig Cunningham/Daily Mail

Former Washington Post photo editor Joseph Elbert moved from now builds unique furniture on his farm near Leon, W.Va. His work will be featured at the Capitol Street Art Fair this Saturday and Sunday.

Craig Cunningham/Daily Mail Joseph Elbert makes his chairs, tables and lamps in this barn he had built on the farm where his wife grew up. Out front, he built a solar-powered wood kiln to dry his green cut lumber.

Craig Cunningham/Daily Mail Elbert's shop also features a guest house for Washington, D.C. friends when they come to visit.

LEON, W.Va. — Retired Washington Post photo editor Joseph Elbert didn't have to go looking for inspiration when he decided to start building furniture.

It nearly fell on him.

When a derecho swept across West Virginia on June 29, 2012, strong winds damaged buildings, uprooted trees and took down power lines across the state. Elbert's Mason County community did not escape the damage.

"There were just trees everywhere and you heard the sound of chainsaws going," Elbert said.

That gave him an idea.

He decided to gather the downed hardwoods from his neighbors and get them milled into lumber.

His neighbors liked the idea, too, often using their tractors and bulldozers to drag the trees to Elbert's property.

He then found a portable sawmill that would process the trees for \$200 per thousand board feet.



Elbert soon had 4,000 board feet of green sawn hardwood on his hands, but then realized he had no way to dry it.

Professional lumberyards use huge kilns to dry their lumber, and while air-drying is an option, it takes a really long time.

Elbert began researching his problem on the Internet and soon found plans for a solar-powered kiln designed by Virginia Tech in the 1970s for use in third-world countries.

The big, insulated box lets in sunlight from the top, heating the space to 140 degrees. As moisture leaves the wood, it rises to the top of the kiln where it escapes through vents.

Elbert said while oak would take a year to air-dry, his kiln cuts the process down to just a month.

Now, his shop is filled with piles of boards ready to be turned into lamps, chairs and tables.

It's not the kind of stuff you find at the local lumber yard. Elbert likes wood with knots, holes and other blemishes. He even cuts the boards to showcase these imperfections.

"It's part of its character," he said. "Most wood workers, it goes into the burn pile."

Elbert's work is a combination of rustic and modern.

He might use knotty, blemished wood, but his furniture is inspired by architecture and the mid-century design of the "Mad Men" era.

His chairs have high backs made up of long wooden slats, cut individually and glued together.

The strong vertical lines mimic those of the Empire State Building. In fact, a large poster of the iconic building hangs on the wall of Elbert's shop.

His lamps continue the motif, as does the base of his triangle-shaped coffee table, which was originally inspired by an old Mechanics Illustrated magazine article about outdoor furniture.

"All music has one simple little theme that repeats. That's what I was trying to accomplish here."

The furniture is similar in other ways, too. Every piece Elbert makes is collapsible, except the lamps.

His table's legs unbolt from the top and fold together for easy transport. The chairs' backs and legs detach just as easily. All the pieces use the same 7/16-inch bolts and Elbert even throws in a wrench with every purchase.

It's like high-end Ikea furniture.

"It just seemed like the natural thing to do," he said.

Elbert said it's one thing to design a pretty piece of furniture, "but to design something with form and function and comes apart, that takes it to another level."

His design process is more like improvisation than composition, however.

Elbert comes up with the designs in his head, then starts cutting out pieces of wood and fitting them together.

He said his abundance of building materials has given him courage to experiment with his pieces.

“When you’ve got 4,000 board feet of hardwood sitting around, you can take some risks.”

He’s never been adverse to risk.

Elbert graduated from Indiana University with a degree in music. But he had also fallen in love with photography and decided to take a job as a newspaper photographer in Bloomington.

He spent the next several years bouncing between publications — shooting for four different papers in five years — before landing in Miami, Fla.

Elbert would spend the next 15 years at the Miami Herald, first as a photographer shooting everything from Super Bowls to a revolution in Nicaragua before moving behind the photo editor’s desk.

He joined The Washington Post in 1988 as assistant managing editor of photography, hired by the paper’s legendary editor Ben Bradlee.

The Post’s photography staff won more awards under Elbert’s direction than any other newspaper in history, including four Pulitzer Prizes, two Best World Picture of the Year awards from the World Press Photo organization, six Photographer of the Year awards from the National Press Photographers’ Association and 17 Photographer of the Year awards from the White House Press Photographers’ Association.

Elbert was named the National Press Photographers’ Association’s Editor of the Year in 1995 and the Joseph A. Sprague award, the organization’s highest honor, in 2003.

But that wasn’t the biggest prize Elbert received during his 20 years at the Post.

He met his wife, Kathy, when she was an art director at the newspaper.

“I would go in and complain to him all the time,” she said. “He was attracted to that for some reason.”

Kathy also introduced Elbert to West Virginia.

She was raised on the farm where they now reside — the property’s been in her family for a century — and the couple decided to relocate there after Elbert left The Washington Post in 2008.

They still keep an apartment in the city and spend about three months there each year, but Elbert is most happy among the West Virginia hills.

“When I’m in D.C. there’s nothing to do,” he said.

Elbert said he feels lucky his furniture has received such a positive response. His work was accepted into Tamarack earlier this year and will make his first showing at the Capitol Street Art Fair this Saturday and Sunday.

“I couldn’t have done this anywhere else,” he said. “West Virginia has a commitment to arts and culture.”

To learn more about Elbert’s work, visit www.josephelbert.com. For more about the Capitol Street Art Fair, go to www.festivallcharleston.com/events/capitol-street-art-fair.

Contact writer Zack Harold at 304-348-4830 or zack.harold@dailymailwv.com. Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/ZackHarold.