

Teen Artisan

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
Wednesday, 01 May 2013 16:58

Gabe Verfuert is only 16, but he's mastered the woodworking skills needed to create handsome wooden pens he's selling to finance a school trip

When Gabe Verfuert, 16, a sophomore at Port Washington High School, was informed by his parents Monica and Charles that he had to raise half of the \$2,600 cost to go to Germany with his German class this summer, he turned to the woodworking skills he learned from his father.

He decided to make and sell the fine wood pens and pencils he learned to make when he was in eighth grade and gave to his teachers as farewell gifts. He also makes cutting boards — small take-along sizes for picnics and larger boards with decorative inlays that some owners say are too pretty to use for cutting.



Gabe sells the handcrafted pens and carving boards at the monthly indoor farmers market at First Congregational Church in Port Washington.

He shares a booth with Janet Trzecinski, secretary to the principal at Port High, who sells her famous carrot cake as a fundraiser for various causes.

It is a popular booth.

Gabe sells his pens for \$10, small cutting boards for \$5 and large cutting boards for \$25 to \$30. He has made more than \$500 and hopes to get a job this summer to earn more money for the trip in June.

Although it's unlikely he will earn half the cost by then, that's OK with his parents.

"He learned to make things to sell to the public, to figure in his costs and to market them," his mother said. "He learned a lot of business skills."

Trzecinski said it's fun sharing a booth with Gabe.

"He does beautiful work," she said. "It's interesting that a young person would take this up. I

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have one of his beautiful cutting boards. I can't cut on it because I don't want to hurt it, but I love to use it to serve cheese, crackers and fruit to friends."

Gabe had hoped to get a job last summer, but he was 15 and employers he contacted only hired teenagers who were 16 or older.

His father, who owns C&M Auto Services in Port Washington and does woodworking to relax, taught Gabe to use the tools and machinery in his woodworking shop when the boy was 14.

Together, they figured out a project Gabe could make and sell for a profit.

"My father showed me a magazine with the pens and said it would be an exciting thing to do," Gabe said.

"He showed me how to use the lathe to make the first one, but I refined my technique myself. I did a lot of reading online."

His first order was from his grandmother, who gave pen-and-pencil sets made by her grandson for Christmas gifts. He made five sets for her before he started making them to order and for the farmers market.

Gabe buys the metal pen components and uses scraps from his father's projects and exotic woods he buys from Kettle Moraine Hardwoods in Hartford for the body. He also made a few acrylic pens.

The natural wood colors range from a soft cream color to almost black and include purple, pink, yellow, green and orange shades.

Many of the pens are made of African woods, including ribbon mahogany, zebrawood, marblewood, light-colored avoidire and orange padauk. Latin American woods, such as bloodwood, purplewood, Brazilian cherry, yellowheart, cocobolo and rosewood, and domestic woods, including oak, holly, black walnut and cherry, are also used.

The beautiful colors and grains of the woods appeal to Gabe, who polishes them to a sheen.

Cocobola, which turns a reddish brown, has a natural floral scent, Gabe said.

He cuts blocks a little longer than the finished pen, drills a hole through the center and uses the lathe to create the smooth curved shape, which he hand sands.

Although the pen is cut into two pieces to insert the ink cartridge and a decorative band, both ends of the pen are from the same block of wood so the grain often continues the length of the pen.

He doesn't use stains or lacquers.

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“The wood has natural oils,” said Gabe, who rubs the wood to bring out the sheen and applies a clear sealer and polish to harden and protect it.

When he started making the pens, he would work on one for an hour or more, wanting it to be perfect, something he inherited from his father.

Now, it takes about 30 minutes to make a pen, which he does in assembly-line fashion.

To replenish his supply for the April 27 farmers market, he made 15 pens in two nights. Since he cannot be at the May 25 market, this was his last one, and he sold almost his entire supply.

Gabe is also a member of his school’s cross-country team, men’s choir, Key Club, mathletes team and National Honor Society.

His next woodworking projects will probably be bowls and platters, he said. He gave wooden key rings for Christmas gifts and made an inlaid wooden razor for himself.

Charles Verfuert, who makes beautiful inlaid furniture, is proud of Gabe’s skills and encourages him to experiment. His oldest son, who is away at college, also enjoys woodworking, as does his daughter Brooke, 14.

Image Information: Gabe Verfuert held a few of the many pens he’s made. Photo by Sam Arendt