

On October 30, 2010, woodturner Beth Ireland climbed into her specially equipped 2005 Chevrolet van and began an audacious 25,000-mile journey across the United States.

Beth labeled her trip *Turning Around America*, a provocative play on words. The purpose, she wrote on her blog, “is to empower people through the simple act of making an object in wood.” She added, “This project consists of a seven-month journey around the country teaching hand skills through woodturning and woodworking to as many groups and individuals as I can come in contact with.”



The logo from Beth's website, courtesy of Jennifer Moller.

Beth Ireland Hasn't Finished Turning Around America

David Heim

The van was both home and classroom. Ireland outfitted the rear of the cargo area with a bandsaw, tool storage, and two mini lathes that she could pull out and support on fold-down legs. Inside, the van held a sleeping bunk, clothing storage, cooking equipment, and the like.

Lifers at Leavenworth probably have roomier accommodations, but the living arrangements didn't faze Beth. She says she favors small

spaces. Although she lives in a roomy three-story house on the outskirts of Boston, she recently built a sleeping loft barely larger than its mattress. A nearby room holds a large cabinet on casters that unfolds to become an all-purpose living/studying nook. Even her basement shop has an intimate feel although she can turn twelve-foot-long objects on her Nova 3000 lathe, eight-footers on her Oneway.

How the project began

The idea for *Turning Around America* first came to Beth when she was a graduate student at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Much of the work involved creating objects and building installations. “Everyone over forty knew how to do those things, but everyone under forty was just putting things together with duct tape and Foamcore,” Beth says. When she asked some of the younger students about ▶

this, they said that no one ever taught them how to do the kind of construction Beth considered second nature. That's when she first realized that people needed hands-on training as well as intellectual learning.

That led Beth and her friend Jennifer Moller, a digital media maker and professor working in Massachusetts, to hatch Turning Around America. They finalized details in early 2010, shortly before Beth received her master's degree. Jennifer created the website for the project and updated it nearly every day. Beth raised most of the money for the project by selling copies of an instructional DVD and by soliciting contributions from individual donors; the AAW kicked in \$1,000. Penn State Industries, Woodcraft, WoodturningOnline.com, and a local plywood dealer also contributed cash and equipment. Financially, though, the

project did not break even. "I figure I'm about two thousand dollars in the hole," she says. Although she lived frugally—"I survived on Wendy's Southwest Salads," she jokes—the van did not. Ireland spent about \$80 every time she filled the tank. At least she avoided speeding tickets and parking fines.

On the road

Before Beth began her trip, she contacted woodturning clubs and people from seminars and classes that she had conducted to set up demonstrations, letting her audiences turn whistles, pens, tool handles, and other objects. Then the grapevine took over.

Teachers, woodturning club members, and others soon heard about the trip and began contacting Beth to schedule visits. For example, Beth did one demonstration at a

woodworking show in Clearwater, Florida. One of the men in the audience told his grandson in Atlanta about Turning Around America. The student relayed the message to his art teacher, who contacted Beth and easily persuaded her to come to the school. (It is a private elementary school for dyslexic children.) Beth got some help from the Classic City Woodturners and Atlanta Woodturners clubs: four members came to the school, each with two lathes. Beth was then able to work with 120 fourth and fifth graders.

Beth worked with adults as well as youth, ages five and up. Most had never seen a lathe and were thrilled to try some woodturning.

In Jacksonville, Florida, Beth spent three days working with at-risk teenagers at the Safe Harbor Maritime Academy, a private organization that aims to help the youngsters by teaching them seamanship and maritime skills. Members of the Northeast Florida Woodturners brought mini lathes, grinders, and tools to augment what Beth carried in her van. ▶



Beth carried a complete woodturning studio in the back of her van.



The van is packed, with everything stowed in its place.



Beth shows off the living quarters of her van, accessed through the side door.



(Far left) Cheering a job well done at the Healthy Learning Academy.



(Left) A student adds color to a turning at the Boys and Girls Clubs in Kingsport, Tennessee.



Beth explains some basics at the Schenck School in Atlanta.



Students at the Schenck School put the final touches on their turnings.



A volunteer helps a new woodturner at the Schenck School.



One of many notes Beth received from the kids she taught.



At-risk boys at Safe Harbor Maritime Academy in Jacksonville, Florida, learn the basics.



Beth leads an impromptu turning session with adults in New Mexico.

An impromptu turning session in Santa Fe.



As club president Ed Malesky wrote in a blog: “Their first task was to turn a square piece of wood round, which the boys did with fearless exuberance. From then on, it was nonstop turning. Beth gave them license to use their imagination and they made some amazing things! One boy made a tool handle with hundreds of beads on it. Another made a simple, elegant tool handle. Real wood-

turning talent began to emerge among the group of seven boys. The three-day class was a *total* success from day one for both the boys and volunteers.”

In early April 2011, Beth spent three days in Kingsport, Tennessee, in the northeast corner of the state. There, Bob Schrader works three days a week with kids at the four Boys and Girls Clubs in town. He has ten mini lathes at one club, which gives forty youth per day a chance to do some turning. When he heard about Beth’s project, he arranged for her to visit and contacted the Tri Cities Woodturning club to help out and provide a stipend.

“The kids had a ball,” says Schrader. “Everyone made at least one item, and some made two, excited about making something from scratch.” There was only one small problem, “A couple of boys who had done a lot of turning felt they knew everything there was to know about woodturning. Beth was able to straighten them out easily.”

For Beth, the trip entailed nearly nonstop demonstrations. “What a week!” she wrote in a January blog posting from California. “I have taught 510 people how to make an object in eight days. I am exhausted.” In the end, she ran more than twenty consecutive days of teaching at schools and colleges around the state,



Beth stages a turning demonstration at the farmer’s market near her home in Massachusetts.



Two successful whistle-turners, at the Boys and Girls Clubs in Kingsport, Tennessee.

and conducted professional demonstrations as well.

In addition to the planned visits, she gave impromptu lessons at truck stops, campgrounds, or just about anywhere she could attract an audience. In Eureka Springs, Arkansas, where she spent five days, she stayed with friends of Doug Stowe, a noted woodworker and educator who hosted her visit. “She taught for one day at the Eureka Springs School of the Arts, three days at the Clear Spring School,” Stowe says,

“and she set up in the driveway, teaching people in the neighborhood.”

Beth finished the trip almost a year to the day after she started, logging more than 25,000 miles on the road and lecturing to more than three thousand children and adults. By her count, 2,097 people had a chance to make something.

Beth had been home barely three months before she and Jennifer left again, this time to spend two weeks in a remote village in Guatemala, teaching basic woodworking. Among other

things, they restored a lathe built from an automotive differential, which now runs on hand-crank power. The people they taught immediately turned around and trained other villagers. “This is what Turning Around America is to us,” Beth wrote. “Empowering people to empower other people.” She and Jennifer plan to return to the village in a year, this time with the gear needed to set up five bicycle-powered lathes so the villagers can make and sell their turnings in a market town two-and-a-half hours away. ▶

(Far right) Cub Scouts in California learned to turn whistles.

(Right) Teaching at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina.



(Below) Beth and company put this lathe in working order on her trip to Guatemala. It's made from an auto differential, with a hand crank, and a tailstock that a colleague made with a chainsaw.



Jennifer Moller rigs up a lathe from next to nothing.

Maintaining momentum

By nearly any measure, Turning Around America was extraordinary. Consider, for example, that the youth turning sessions at an AAW symposium attract between fifty and seventy-five youngsters. That was a day's work for Beth, repeated dozens of times. David Ellsworth, like many teachers, works with a half-dozen students at a time and would have to run years of classes to teach the number of students Beth encountered in a few months.

Turning Around America had an unprecedented short-term impact—she wowed 'em. The long-term effect is harder to gauge. It will be up to parents, educators, and woodturning club members to maintain the enthusiasm Beth generated. She alluded to that in one of her final blog postings: "The

experience and education I shared will get multiplied over time in so many ways. The objects that were made will be cherished for years to come. The woodturning guild members who worked with me are now teaching others. Some high school teachers are now ordering lathes to add to their curriculum."

True, places like the Safe Harbor Maritime Academy have set up an ongoing woodturning program (*see Florida Chapter sidebar*). But elsewhere, the realities of tight budgets and lack of manpower stymie the best of intentions. As Bob Schrader of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Kingsport says, "We have so many kids that want to come to woodshop and so few lathes that we do not get to grow their enthusiasm."

Beth dealt with those issues on her blog, in her characteristically upbeat

fashion, "I have seen the frustration that public school teachers are facing every day. Many schools no longer had art or wood classes. I have seen a growing feeling of disempowerment in our country. Turning Around America started as a simple project created by two artists. It has turned into a vehicle for possibility and empowerment for so many people."

Beth hit the road again in May for a six-month stint of traveling and demonstrating. After that, she plans to spend another month in Guatemala. "I guess traveling is my new life," she says. To learn more about Beth Ireland's Turning Around America, visit turningaroundamerica.com. ■

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Florida Chapter Connects with Turning Around America

When the Northeast Florida Woodturners Association learned about Beth Ireland's Turning Around America, I had been trying to get a youth program started within our club. I had received an education grant from our club to attend Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts where I wanted to enhance my woodturning skills so I could work more effectively with youth.

Beth would be demonstrating at the Florida Woodturning Symposium and I was hoping we could link our efforts. As it turned out, Beth's program became the impetus for us to get more involved with young turners.

I found a youth group in the area that we could incorporate into Beth's program, one that our club could build a sustaining relationship with. Safe Harbor Maritime Academy, a home for at-risk boys, perfectly fit the bill. I contacted Dr. Robbie Smith, director of the home, and she readily accepted the idea. A dream of introducing young people to woodturning began to turn into a reality.

Beth agreed to come to Jacksonville for three days after the symposium to work with the boys and volunteers from the club. Seven boys participated in the program, along with Beth and eight club members. Beth's approach was to get the boys on the lathe making something

as quickly as possible. We made simple tools from Allen wrenches so the boys could use them to make whistles, stick pens, small boxes, chessmen, and small vessels. The pride in their workmanship was evident in the boys' faces at the end of the week. Club members decided to continue working at Safe Harbor on a regular basis.

In our discussions with other AAW chapters that had youth programs, we realized that to keep interest and momentum, we would need to put together a weekly program. This fit well with Safe Harbor's vocational program, which would give us three hours to work with the boys every Friday morning. Further planning produced a schedule that would send at least two volunteers to work with three to four boys, once a week. After nearly ten months, the boys have turned mallets, candleholders, spurtles, snowman ornaments, fishing reels, eggs, offset cars, picture frames, magic wands, wooden and acrylic pens, and two outdoor games—King and Kubbs and Molkke. They turned ornaments and a Christmas tree, which was first exhibited at the Greater Jacksonville Fair and then donated to the local Woodcraft-sponsored Festival of Trees charity auction, where the tree raised more than \$150.

The enthusiasm is strong and several of the boys remarked that our turning sessions were the highlight of their week. I think it's the highlight of the

week for our volunteers, too. One regular volunteer's spouse remarked that she could always tell from the smile on her husband's face when he had been working with the boys at Safe Harbor. We are continuing this program with a new set of projects for the more experienced boys and a basics program for boys who enter the program as the senior members leave.

This rewarding experience was kicked off by Beth and is now maintained by the wonderful members of our club. Learn more about our program by visiting TurningArtsGroup.com.

—*Kay Seivert, Outreach Coordinator,
Northeast Florida Woodturners Association*



Several boys from the Safe Harbor Maritime Academy practice turning at their regular Friday workshop.

Photo: Ed Malesky