

Business

Originality, creativity are this woodworker's creed

By Janice Drickey

The children in day care at Mt. Olive Lutheran Church have a new play center, designed by a man who has obviously not forgotten what it's like to be a kid.

Two tiers of smoothly sculptured wood can be climbed into or slid down from; there are benches that double as drums ("drumsticks provided"), built-in blackboards, rubber gymnastic rings and a square of plexi-glass in the floor so a child standing

on the second tier can see what's happening below. In one corner, there's a magnifying glass inlaid in the wood, with a shelf below it so

children can "look at things up close." There are glittery stars and moons on the floor and flags on every turret.

For Sebastopol woodworker Charley Prowell, the play center was "such a labor of love

that I wanted an excuse to do it."

Aided by suggestions from wife Jennifer (the stars and moons were her idea), Prowell designed and built the dream-toy in exchange for his two-year-old son Ben's schooling fees.

The 40-year-old father of Ben and Sam, who's five, is more likely to be found creating gleaming dining room tables or writing desks. These are Prowell's "two favorite commissions," he says, because of the "intimacy" he brings to them.

"It's the challenge of every

again, even if a client wants it."

He blinks owlishly behind horn-rimmed spectacles. "There'll have to be some changes. That enables the client to get a peculiar piece of work and me not to go to sleep while putting it together."

Last August, Prowell's craftsmanship landed him on the cover of "Fine Woodworking" magazine and the winter edition of "Woodwork."

"From that point on, I haven't had to push so hard," he says with satisfaction.

"The calls have been coming to me." However, Prowell admits, projects like the one he is working on now, refurbishing the library and study of a house built in the 1880's, still come along only "once a

year."

Prowell's earliest woodworking memories are of days spent in the shop of his grandfather, a furniture maker in Sydney, Illinois. By the time he was 14, he was working on job sites with his

father, a carpenter and part-time woodworker ("because he paid - Grandpa didn't pay," he quips). Prowell worked as a carpenter through college, then moved to San Francisco and returned to woodworking.

In the city, he became known for designing quality restaurant interiors. Offers of custom work led him to Marin, where he set up shop for four and a half years. One Fourth of July, at a parade at Larkspur, he met Jennifer, a native of England who grew up in New York City. The couple ignited more than a few sparks of their own and "never looked back," Prowell says.

Soon after they were married seven years ago, the Prowells moved to Sebastopol. "It's a small town, so we can engrain ourselves and know everyone," Prowell explains. "I was raised in a town of 700 people and I like that feeling." He laughs. "You can't get away with anything here."

A typical day finds Prowell writing articles and fiction from 4:30 to 7:30 a.m., as he has for the past 10 years. "That adds a different blend to the day," he explains. "It's so different from what I do out in my workshop."

At 9:15 each morning, Prowell is in the workshop, working on designs for six-and-a-half to seven hours a day. "I just get stretched out if it's beyond that," he admits. In-between, he enjoys shuttling his sons back and forth to their respective schools.

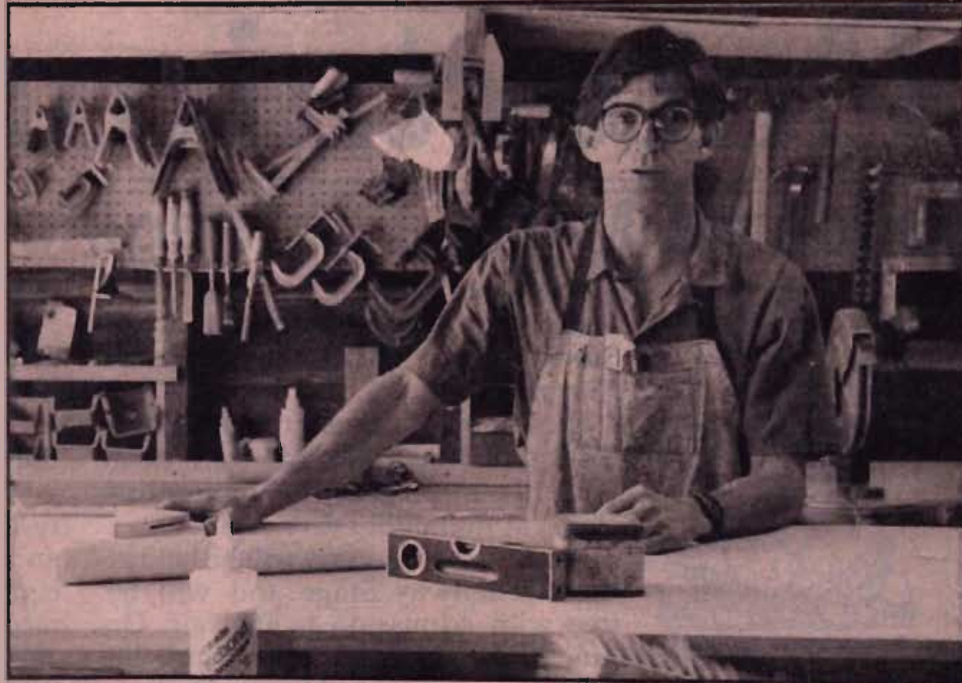
Prowell's latest table, made of wenge ("when-gay"), an expen-

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—Charley Prowell

new piece," he says eagerly, smoothing the dark chocolate wood of his latest dining table creation.

"I don't come out with a line and then make ten of these in a row. In fact, I'll never make this



Charley Prowell's workshop has the tools necessary to complete almost any kind of woodworking project.

sive hardwood forested out of Zaire and Mozambique, will take about three full weeks to complete. It's the very densest wood I've ever worked with," he says.

Recent rains caused the unveneered table to bow a full inch, and for two days Prowell thought about scrapping the project and returning the client's \$2,500 advance, something he has never had to do before. But quitting, he decided, went against his grain. "I just hate turning around on the freeway if I've missed an exit," he says by way of analogy. "Just go for-

ward." For four days, 24 hours a day, he turned heat lamps on the table and waited. When he saw that the wood had flattened out, Prowell admits he was "greatly relieved."

The Sebastopol woodworker says he would only want his sons to go into the profession if they remained in "the artistic end."

"You want your stuff to be appreciated 200 years from now," he said slowly. "I think that's the whole point: to create designs that will still be appreciated long, long after I'm gone."