

Visualizing Through One's Hands

"IT IS AN IMPRESSIVE LINE in elevator talk to say that I teach newly blind adults to use power tools," says Bill Reynolds '69. After a 35-year career as a painter and muralist in Washington, D.C., and Boston, Reynolds became a woodworking instructor at the Carroll Center for the Blind, a leading blindness rehabilitation center in Newton, Massachusetts, in 2010 and never looked back.

Enrolling as a premed student at Franklin & Marshall College after graduating from Taft, he quickly developed a love for the visual arts. "At that time, I wasn't

aware that art was a possible avenue, but I ended up taking a lot of philosophy classes—philosophy of aesthetics—and some art courses," he remembers. From there, Reynolds built an exciting career as a freelance artist, painting everything from courtroom illustrations for the Supreme Court to vast murals in government buildings and museums.

"At the same time, I also had an interest in the field of blindness and Braille," he continues. "It was the opposite of my intense focus on visual work, but really Braille is all about communication, and

that's what painting is about too." And when the Great Recession hit in 2008 and he struggled to acquire commissions to paint new works, the time was right for Reynolds to transform this lifelong fascination into a career opportunity.

"When the economy went down, mural projects went down too," he explains. "I was wondering what to do next and ultimately came across the Carroll Center." But when he inquired about a possible position at the center, he was surprised with his assignment. "I was more interested in Braille, but when they saw that I was an



Bill Reynolds '69 teaching woodworking to a client at the Carroll Center for the Blind. If clients have any small level of vision besides zero light perception, they work blindfolded to focus on their hand skills. ROGER FARRINGTON



Reynolds teaches a blind client how to use his hands and tools safely through woodworking.

artist, they automatically put me to work in the woodshop. All my life, I was so myopic about painting that I never thought I would be doing anything other than that,” he says. “But creativity is creativity.”

He learned to channel his talents toward new artistic pursuits, and nearly a decade later, he continues to guide visually impaired students as they construct anything from jewelry and music boxes to small pieces of furniture like bedside tables.

Working with only two or three students at a time, Reynolds slowly introduces them to the woodworking process. “Some of the clients are freaked out when they hear that woodworking is part of the program,” he says, “but I just calm them down on the first day of class and say, ‘No one has to use any power tools.’” They start with basic hand tools and cordless drills, only gradually working up to the more powerful equipment.

“Everyone must feel comfortable and safe,” he stresses. “Often, people have no interest in using a power saw, so I ask that they just let me show them how one would use it non-visually. When they discover

that it’s just a few logical steps, they often challenge themselves and are thrilled.” By the end of the course, the students are able to operate table saws, power miter saws, and drill presses—all under Reynolds’ careful supervision. “If someone is working on a power tool, I’m focused on them 100 percent, ready to throw my body into the middle of the saw if I have to.”

Ultimately, it’s the process, rather than the end product, that’s most valuable. “It’s a creative approach that encourages good organizational skills, a focus on hand-to-brain communication, paying attention to detail, and working on visualization,” Reynolds says. “And these simple woodworking projects really incorporate everything else that they’re learning at the institution. We use a Braille ruler and digital recording devices. And, much like they learn in safe-cooking preparation classes, they practice maintaining an organized workspace,” he adds.

For Reynolds, there is an even greater significance to his work. “It’s very empowering for my students,” he’s proud to say. “They’ve lost the ability to do so many things, but here they’re making something that they designed themselves. For the first time in quite a while, they feel like they’re in control—that’s huge!” ■

Top left: As a longtime freelance artist, Reynolds painted this 20-foot by 5-foot mural, which depicts the Boston waterfront around 1916.

Bottom left: Reynolds working with a Braille reader at the Carroll Center.



—Christopher Browner '12