

PROFILES

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FEATURED SHOP:

CLANCY WOODWORKING

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ATLANTA CABINET SHOP

2020 VISION:

AN OVERVIEW



FEATURED SHOP

CLANCY WOODWORKING

Finding a home AWAY FROM HOME

by Carla Atkinson

Many of the best business “origin stories” involve a big leap of faith. For Brian Clancy, two “leaps” have defined his path in life so far, and one of them was an especially long leap across the Atlantic Ocean.

Over the past 60 years, Clancy’s family has had footholds in both Ireland and in United States. His father, Brendan, and Brendan’s brothers, Patrick and Eugene, came to America to tour with their band,

The Irish Ramblers, during the folk era of the early 1960s. They had just released an album on the American record label Elektra, which played a big role in the development of contemporary folk and rock music from the 1950s through the 1970s. While touring in Philadelphia, Clancy’s father met his mother, Mary Donnelly, who had immigrated to the United States in 1962.

“Believe it or not, they had grown up two

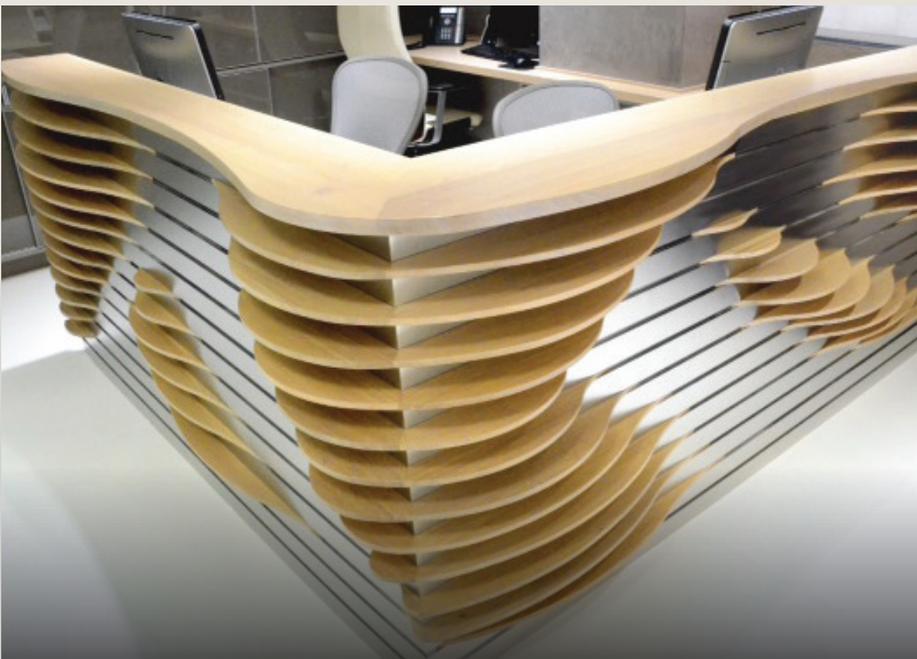
miles apart in Ireland without knowing one another and had to come to America to meet!” Clancy says. “They married soon after. With my father’s Irish teaching certificate about to expire, they decide to move back to Ireland. My sister and brothers were all born and raised there.”

Clancy’s uncles chose to settle in the United States – a decision that would prove to have a big impact on Clancy, who grew up in Northern Ireland at an especially volatile time.

“I grew up in the 70s and 80s when ‘The Troubles’ were at their peak,” he says. “My uncles would visit and encourage us to come to America and see what it was like.” After Clancy spent several years going to university in England, he took them up on their invitation and went to the States for a summer visit.

“I just loved the United States when I got here,” he says. The experience of growing up amid so much turmoil in Ireland helped convince Clancy to stay in America.

“Over here, no one cared about what religious denomination you were,” he says. “They were just really interested in where you were from – and the Irish-American people here wanted to tell me





*A man's homeland
is wherever he prospers.
— Aristophanes*



Clancy's workshop in Sherman, CT



where their relatives were born! I ended up staying and working with my uncle Eugene.”

Eugene Clancy had started a moving and storage company after settling in the States; both uncles lived in the suburbs of New York City.

“Their love of Irish music has always flourished and was passed onto the next generation, as was the family business,” Clancy says. “It’s now one of the largest and most diversified relocation companies in the greater New York area.”

A SECOND LEAP

Clancy was grateful to have a job to ease his transition to the States, but he figured out pretty quickly that the moving and storage business was not for him.

He had always had an interest in woodworking, and he took a few evening courses at SUNY Purchase University, which offered classes in photography, cabinetry, furniture design, and more.

After working with his uncle Eugene for 10 years, Clancy decided it was time to change course.

“I left the secure job that paid my bills and took a major step backward to pursue the dream,” he says. “But the knowledge and work ethic I gained from working with my uncle and cousins in the moving business prepared me for branching out on my own. One uncle in particular is very fond of woodworking, and he encouraged me as I was getting started.”

Clancy was able to get a job despite having no experience, starting at the bottom and working his way up. He later moved on to a different shop, spending a total of a year at both places. Meanwhile, friends and family began asking him to help them with side projects, and he soon found it challenging to balance those projects and his day job.

“It was always in the back of my mind that I was going to be working on my own one day,” Clancy recalls. “With the

encouragement of my wife, I decided to start pursuing it. I rented a two-car garage space in my town (Pawling, NY) and began clambering my way through. I’ve been on my own ever since.”

He slowly built a list of clients among the architects, designers, and contractors in the area. “I struggled the first couple of years, but eventually had a chance to prove myself,” Clancy says. “Repeat customers were great... they knew about the quality of my work and that I would get it done on time.”

For the next 15 years, Clancy Woodworking focused on residential projects, surviving the usual challenges that come with starting a business as well as a huge and unusual challenge that affected most cabinetry shops: The great recession of 2008/2009.

Fortunately, fate tossed Clancy a bit of luck right about that time, and his skills and reputation helped him run with it. “At the point when the architects and



"Sometimes you take a leap of blind faith, and it leads you on a path you never would have considered."
— Brian Clancy

builders had stopped calling, I got a chance to renovate a beach house in Fire Island, NY," Clancy says. "It started as a request to create a couple of built-ins and maybe replace a window or two, but it turned into an entire home renovation that lasted two years. We went through the beach house from top to bottom, putting in new kitchen cabinets, living room millwork and shiplap on all the walls to give the place the feeling of being at the beach."

BRANCHING OUT

Meanwhile, the economy began to improve, his old customers began calling again, and things started getting busy.

Then a random conversation at a party brought Clancy a brand-new opportunity at a time when he was ready for a change. An architect whose wife was friends with Clancy's wife, Kathleen, began telling Clancy about his work in commercial architecture. The architect had worked on high-end retail spaces in Manhattan

and was branching out, taking on a plastic surgeon's office. He asked Clancy to work with him on it as he thought it would be a perfect fit for them both.

"I was getting into my 40s and had been doing residential work for 15 years," Clancy recalls. "This was new territory for me, and it turned out to be a great project."

The assignment also ended up pushing Clancy's small shop toward new technology. The design for the reception desk for the plastic surgeon's practice was complex, calling for many radiuses and contours. The material to be used was solid oak, and he realized he couldn't do the project by hand; Clancy asked for help and was able to use the services of another shop's CNC machine to make the complicated design come to life.

"It was my first exposure to a CNC machine," he remembers, "and I was inspired by how effortlessly the countertops were being cut from the files. I knew nothing about the workings of a CNC machine, but I knew that if I wanted to step up to the next level, I would have to incorporate this technology into my company. I got a hunger for pursuing it, learning more by taking classes and visiting other shops. Eventually, I bought my first and only CNC, which has completely changed my business."

And that reception desk? It won a Wood Diamond Award from the CMA.

A NEW ERA

That plastic surgery office job and its push toward automation played a big role in shaping the future of Clancy Woodworking.

"After that first commercial job, I did my first restaurant, and everything grew from there," he says. The company Clancy built the restaurant with became one of his bigger clients, and he later began working with another restaurant company. Alongside the commercial work that was commanding much of his time, Clancy's residential clients were calling, too, and he eventually settled into a groove, doing a 50/50 mix.

"That's where I am now," he says.

"Before the CNC, there were projects I would never have considered. Now my confidence has grown because I know what I can accomplish. I've also been able to upgrade the equipment in my shop, which means I can make cabinets more quickly and efficiently. I run Mosaic software, which helps me make presentations to customers in addition to giving me the files for cutting on the CNC. I also switched to dowel construction, which speeds things along."

Other shops now come to Clancy for help cutting parts, a sideline that grew out of helping someone with the parts for a wine cellar.

"Sometimes you take a leap of blind faith, and it leads you on a path you never



would have considered,” he says. “It’s turned out great for my business. It’s become profitable, and we’ve been able to sustain buying the new equipment because the volume of work is there.”

GO BIG OR STAY HOME

The shape of Clancy Woodworking’s future will depend in part on how Clancy decides to address the unusual circumstances surrounding his business location in Sherman, CT, where he and his family moved in 2002.

“I was looking to find a property with a barn that I could convert into a workshop,” he says. “My wife and I both have family in Connecticut, so we began looking there. We found a place with a small barn, which I initially thought I could add onto. After thinking about it, we decided to build a new shop instead. It was in a private country setting that was still in close proximity to my client base.”

His new 2,100 square foot shop with an upstairs office is close to his home, built in a spot where it blends in with the lay of the land and looks like it has always been there, Clancy says. He operates under a special “Home-Based Contractor” permit that allows him to operate in a residential area. The down side? He can’t employ more than one person.

“I outsource a lot to compensate for just having one employee,” he says. “I’m limited in the jobs I can take on because of my labor situation. Moving to a more commercial location with fewer business restrictions would make sense if I want to expand, but I go back and forth on the best option. Would it be worth it to buy or rent a space and then take on more employees to cover those additional costs?”

“I love where the shop is now,” he says. “I’m so grateful that I get to put my kids on the bus every morning and welcome them home again in the afternoon. I don’t have to deal with the daily commute. That’s been a blessing.”

He laughs, seemingly overcome in the moment by his good fortune. “I’ve got it really good!”

But – so often there is a “but” – the question of whether he should take the business to the next level does nag at him. “It’s been in my head for last five years or so,” he acknowledges. “I do lack the space and people to take on all the opportunities that come my way.”

Clancy doesn’t know the answer yet, but he is certain that he’s doing the work he was meant to do.

“I just have a passion for woodworking,” he says. “It was very exciting for me to

FINDING COMMUNITY

Around the time that Brian Clancy was investing in his first CNC, he was introduced to the Cabinet Makers Association.

“I first heard of the CMA at a tradeshow many years ago, but I didn’t join then because I didn’t have my own business yet,” he says. “About five years ago — when I’d been a shop owner for 14 years — I went to a CMA regional event in New Jersey. On paper, the event sounded interesting as I had been slogging it out with very little prior business experience; in person, it was even more impressive. There was a feeling of collaboration I was not used to seeing, and I came away knowing that I wanted to be part of this organization. I was so impressed by the CMA members who graciously invited other members into their shops and openly discussed their systems.

“I got so many questions answered even at that first event,” he says. “It was encouraging to see how friendly these guys were and how willing they were to share their knowledge. I’ve been an active member ever since and attend as many events as possible. I always come away reinvigorated, with new ideas to take back to the shop. I believe it’s helped me stay focused on continuous improvements — whether it’s figuring out how to make a superior product or how to save five minutes here and there.”



take that leap of faith from a secure job with my family to this career. Where that's led me to today... I just can't believe it. I really enjoy the projects that we've done. The variety keeps it interesting; no two jobs are ever the same. Some turn out to be challenging, but when I get to work through the process of figuring out how to complete a project and then I get to the other end and see it finished, it's a very satisfying feeling. I don't consider it work."

HARD-EARNED WISDOM

While he's an enthusiastic booster for the profession, he's also experienced the down sides and has some perspective for those starting out.

"I've gone through times when I was under a lot of pressure and stress to get jobs done, and now I try to be much more careful about what I take on," he says. "I'm not going to take every opportunity that comes along because some of the commercial projects' time frames are so tight that a shop my size would have a hard time making the deadline and keeping other projects afloat.

"The business end of the woodworking industry can be very stressful," he says. "You deal with difficult clients and sometimes have to fight to get paid. My passion for wood-working has helped me push through the difficult times. When

you're working on a tough project, the thing you have to remember is that this is one job and it won't last forever."

He also recommends investing in technology that can alleviate some of the pressure and introduce new streams of income.

Clancy also highly recommends getting involved with the CMA. "It's been a great resource for me to bounce things off other shop owners," he says. "I have people I text or call all the time when I have a quick question. They help me figure it out. As an example, one of the members helped walk me through the set-up to switch over to dowel construction for my cabinets, and that knowledge alone has been worth the cost of my membership. This year, I was honored to become a member of the Board of Directors – they put me right to work by nominating me as Secretary, so now I have an opportunity to give back."

FAMILY FOUNDATIONS

Clancy's family ties between the United States and Ireland are as strong as ever.

"My family comes here to visit, and I often go home again," he says.

And what about the uncles who played such a big role in urging Clancy to visit their adopted home and in easing his way to making the US his home? They're now in their 80s and have retired, he says. His uncle Eugene, who shares his love of woodworking, "stops by the shop every so often to see how things are going."

Their visits to Ireland with tales of how great America was during Clancy's childhood were powerful and changed his life. "When I got here, I realized this was where I'd always want to stay," he says.

The good things have flowed both ways: Clancy's craftsmanship and commitment have undoubtedly made his adopted homeland a richer place. 🇺🇸

"My passion for woodworking has helped me push through the difficult times."
— Brian Clancy