

Bonded by wood and faith

Jackson Park Ministries, Woodworkers Association partner to provide furniture and skills to families in need of housing.

By Greg Lacour
Special Correspondent

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You don't see the shop unless you're looking for it, and even then it's easy to miss.

It occupies a warehouse at the end of a gravel driveway off Airport Drive, currently under construction. The only indication that something unusual is here is the small sign hanging above the doorway that reads "JPM," for Jackson Park Ministries.



Bob Fields of the Charlotte Woodworkers Association works on a project at the Jackson Park Ministries workshop. The association is made up of people who like to work with wood and who help groups in the community, including JPM. PHOTOS BY DAVID T. FOSTER III - dtfoster@charlotteobserver.com

The organization has operated for 25 years, helping families in the Jackson Park neighborhood with food, shelter and job skills; its biggest ministry is its housing program, which sets up families referred by local churches into any of 32 apartments it maintains and operates while teaching family members home, job and financial skills.

But it's only been recently that JPM has joined with the Charlotte Woodworkers Association in a partnership that's good for both organizations - and that's brought together a pair of Midwesterners, each trying to build their groups and strengthen their ties to the city both have adopted.

Bruce Bogust, who moved from Milwaukee seven years ago, has been president of the Woodworkers Association for three years. The association has been around since 1983, but it had always held its monthly meetings in church halls and the like. The woodworkers wanted a place where they could meet and work on projects - a workshop that could double as a gathering space.

JPM had rented most of the warehouse from the airport and used it to store construction materials and furniture for its apartments. But the organization and its Michigan-born information technology manager, Jim Emery, were looking for more space to build and repair furniture and, perhaps, teach some of the resident's woodworking as part of JPM's job skills program.

"I wanted to bring this concept of fixing furniture" to the job skills program, Emery said, "but I realized it was more than just I could handle."

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So a partnership was born. The Woodworkers Association meets at the shop once a month, but members also spend a couple of hours every week - on Monday afternoons, usually - working on



These two pieces were created by members of the Charlotte Woodworkers Association for an auction to benefit One Special Christmas.

projects, often furniture construction or repair for the JPM apartments. JPM, in return, uses the furniture and enlists Woodworkers Association members in teaching job skills.

"They support us in a lot of ways here at the shop. They've done a lot to get tools here - hand tools, power tools," Emery said one recent Monday afternoon as a saw whined behind him. "We take families who are missing basic life skills and enroll them in a one- to two-year program teaching them parenting skills, job skills, finance ...

"And at the point where they're graduating from the program, everything in the apartment goes with them:

furniture, linens, beds, everything but the stove and the refrigerator. So every time someone graduates, we need to refurbish the apartment ... It's a learning tool. Even these broken things in your life can be fixed and brought back to usefulness. So they not only learn a job skill but get a chance to apply that lesson to their lives."

The Woodworkers Association is happy to have a place that is, literally, hands-on. "The club now has a good place to meet where we can have demonstrations and stuff," Bogust said. "Before, we were meeting in a church, and it's kind of hard to bring a big cabinet in with a saw."

The groups maintain a corkboard on which they've tacked photos of some of the things the woodworkers have built or refurbished for JPM. Basic, sturdy stuff: cabinets, chairs, one giant table that woodworker Mike Smith made from a pair of oaken doors he slapped together with a cherry inlay in the shape of a cross.

It's a reminder of the obvious parallels between woodworking and history's most famous woodworker, as was the T-shirt Smith wore to his recent Monday work session at the shop. It read, "1 Savior + 3 Nails = 4 given."

But both Bogust and Emery were quick to point out that JPM is a nondenominational ministry, and the Woodworkers Association's partnership isn't for religious reasons. They just wanted space and a vehicle to help people.

"It probably took us three months to get this thing finished," said Smith, referring to the table with the cross inlay. "Because we're here only one day a week, for as many hours as we can donate ...

"It never hurts to give back. Some people don't have it as good as other people, and it makes you feel good to do something for someone who needs it."