

SHLIT

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Photo by Dennis Bell

Chris Kling repairs a window, just one of a myriad of specialties that the wood shop in Branford features. The shop is known for its specialty windows and molding. Kling also builds and repairs larger pieces of furniture, including inlaid bookcases, tables, desks, chairs, and beds, along with headboards.

The magic of wood

Local woodworking shop hosts open house

By Lisa Reisman
Special to ShoreView

custom-made corner brackets
under the porch of their beach

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The name Window Master could not be more misleading. Indeed, says owner Chris Kling, miracle worker in wood and glass, as well as toymaker and furniture builder, window repair is just one out of a myriad of specialties that the wood shop in Branford features.

Kling tells the story of the woman who scored the deal of her lifetime on overstock.com: a glass sink hand-painted with colorful Koi fish. All she needed was something to put it on, she told Kling. So he built a mahogany vanity with a black onyx granite top, recessed the sink into the granite, and put lights underneath.

"When you turn the lights on," says the mustachioed Kling, 56, "it looks like the fish are swimming."

Then there was the customer whose friend's daughter had recently passed away. The daughter had loved gardening—and dragonflies. So Kling made a wooden dragonfly with wings of plexiglass for the memorial garden created in her honor. There was also the Westbrook man who wanted to surprise his wife with

custom-made corner brackets under the porch of their beach cottage. Kling took three pieces of glass, had them melted into a design of mermaids and whales, and then set and sealed them between two pieces of wood.

"There's nothing we can't make, or recreate, or repair, in wood and glass," says Kling. And with Window Master's recent move, and the increased space for equipment and materials, "we can do that much more." The new headquarters, on 3 Jefferson Road just off West Main Street in Branford near the Honda dealership, is three times bigger than the original store.

Amid the warm smell of sawdust and the hum of the vacuum in his vast workshop, you can sense the passion and pride Kling derives from his work, not least when he brings out his wooden dinosaurs, namely a stegosaurus, brachiosaurus and, of course, Tyrannosaurus Rex. He fashions them without glue or lead paint or any toxic chemicals, designing the pieces to lock into each other and disassemble, and includes a sheet with all the parts so "kids can figure out how to fit them together." While other stores feature similar models of wooden dinosaurs, Kling can make them on virtually any scale.

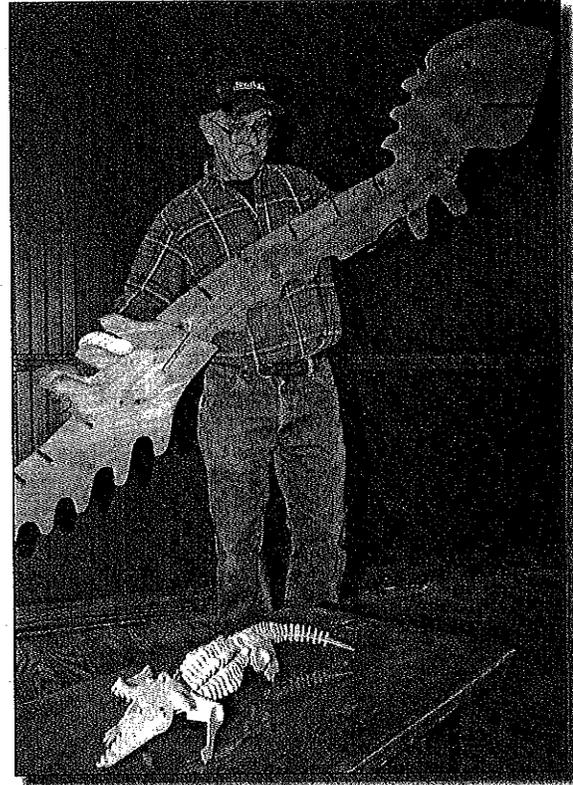


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This is what custom-made is all about. The drill goes like this: You come into the shop with an idea. Kling will work up an image on a state-of-the-art 3D computer

program and cut out its likeness in foam.

"Which allows the customer to make any changes or adjustments before I start working with the

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Wood: Local woodworking shop hosts open house

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real stuff," he explains.

Recent examples of this exercise: doll-house furniture, jewelry boxes, bird houses, carved signs, and simple burial boxes. For the Christmas season, he makes lawn ornaments like sleighs and reindeer. Not long ago he agreed to craft an authentic rendition of a 1952 Telecaster guitar out of alder and swamp ash with original pickups and hardware.

Kling grew up repairing wooden boats in the Momauguin section of East Haven. Following three years in the army, he honed his craft doing subcontracting work for Yale University — he redid the windows on Old Campus when Yale went co-ed in 1974. Over the years, he's come to relish seemingly challenging requests, such as recreating the vintage guitar. (Ask him about the triangular drawer.)

"People go all over, trying to find someone to help them realize their idea, and then, basically by word of mouth, they end up at our shop," says his wife Carla, 54, a gregarious woman with a booming laugh who wryly describes herself as "the mom of the mom-and-pop operation, the one that gets to do all the little things that wouldn't otherwise get done."

Not that Window Master limits itself to small jobs. While the shop is known for its specialty windows and molding, Kling also builds and repairs larger pieces of furniture, including inlaid bookcases, tables, desks, chairs, and beds, along with headboards.

"You give us a call and we'll come to your house, take all the measurements, and come

up with a reasonable price." A few years back, Kling replaced a pair of hurricane doors made in 1860 for a house on St. Roman Street in New Haven, removing the original doors, and taking them apart. The hardest part was replicating the engineering to make the doors both functional and weatherproof. Turning the handles down, he finally figured out, forced a mechanism in the hardware to lift the doors out of the threshold and then open in.

It was by a similar process that Kling taught himself how to make renditions of pieces from as far back as the 1700s.

"I'd dismantle tables and then put them back together," he says. "I studied how the masters did it and then I used new technology to duplicate what they did."

He also schooled himself in the art of "reading" wood — that is to say, discerning which wood would best serve a specific use. The mahogany for the hurricane doors, for example, he special-ordered from a mill in Massachusetts. (Mahogany, he notes, is particularly durable.) Much of the wood in the shop has been reclaimed from tobacco barns and old churches around Connecticut. Rubbing his hand over the grain on a table made of pine with reverence, he remarks, "you could never buy boards today that would give you that look."

Better yet, using materials that would otherwise go to the scrapyard, Kling also saves resources whose expense would be passed along to the customer. According to Carla Kling, people are "continually amazed by how little we

charge." Another reason for the reasonable costs: Window Master is a one-stop shopping place. Everything's on site so there's no need to out-source anything. "We never set a price without making sure the customer knows exactly what he's getting," she adds.

Through the years, Window Master has done high-profile restoration jobs for the Wallingford Silver Museum and the Derby Opera House. When Nobile Construction needed a new conference table to impress clients, they went to Window Master. So did the owners of Branford's Regatta Restaurant, now known as Nellie Green's, when they were looking for someone to do their bar racks and glass work.

And while Window Master won't turn down such projects, its focus has always been on the people who come into the shop looking for something they can't find anywhere else. "Of course there's a price for personalized attention," sighs Carla. "The customer comes first, and here we are, still unpacking after six weeks."

The plan is to model the new space after a New York loft showroom. An open house is slated for Saturday, Oct. 18. There will be door prizes and other surprises.

"All these years, we've kept our heads down and worked hard to keep our operation going and our standard of quality high and our customers happy, pretty much relying on word of mouth," she continues. "With all this extra room, we figured it was time to let the secret out."

Pumpkin: A perfect finish for an autumn meal

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set. Enjoy your pie unadorned. If you prefer it decorated, continue with these directions before the pie has finished baking.

To make the pastry leaf:

Soon after placing the pie in the oven, ready a small baking sheet lined with parchment paper, or grease a non-stick cooking sheet. Go outside and find a beautiful, dried oak or maple leaf. Wash by rinsing, and pat it dry. This is your template. If leaves are scarce, simply sketch one. Retrieve the reserved dough from the refrigerator. Roll it out on a lightly floured surface. Place your leaf template on top. Using a small sharp knife, cleanly cut around the outside of the leaf and stem. Using a thin turner, transfer to the

baking sheet. Cut a few slits in the leaf to create a midrib and several veins. Tug on the dough gently to slightly open the slits. Place the leaf in the oven while set at 350 degrees and bake for a few minutes, perhaps as little as 5 minutes, until light golden brown. Then remove it from oven, and set aside.

To create the pecan border:

About 15 minutes before the pie has completely finished baking, very carefully remove the pie from the oven. Working quickly, arrange the pecans in a decorative border near the crust. Position the leaf in the center. To glaze the pecans, simply sprinkle lightly with a little fine sugar.

To finish baking:

Return the decorated pie to the oven, and continue baking for the remaining 15 minutes, until top is firm, slightly darkened, and just beginning to show cracks. Baking to this point will guarantee a stand-up pie — one with a firm, velvety texture that perfectly complements moist and creamy toppings. The total cooking time for the pie is one hour.

Allow the pie to cool completely on a wire rack. Then place in the refrigerator to chill overnight. The pie is best served cold with a generous dollop of whipped cream or vanilla ice cream.