

IDEAS & OPINIONS

Full Circle Villager Uses His Engineering Talents To Help Others



**Joe
Pedersen**



753-1119 ext. 9026
joe.pedersen
@thevillagesmedia.com

 Life is full of makers and wreckers.

Village of Lynnhaven resident John Manion is a maker.

Growing up, I knew little of building, but I was very much delighted by taking things apart – to the dissatisfaction of my father and his train sets.

Bless the man.

Only as I matured did I discover the elation in creation – thank you, Legos.

It was only natural then that my attention piqued upon hearing Ed Williams, leader of the Old Time Radio Drama Club, mention that a friend of his made him a RCA 44bx mic – the kind of retro-style microphone announcers of

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John Manion, of the Village of Lynnhaven, tightens a few of the screws of a portable step ladder he built with parts from a broken attic ladder that were thrown out by one of his neighbors.

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the past have been seen with in photos.

"John Manion made it from scratch," said Williams, of the Village of Virginia Trace. "He's what you would call a maker."

A maker?

I knew anyone with such a title had to be interesting, and Manion did not disappoint.

A cool October breeze greeted me upon arriving at Manion's workshop, which is a converted golf cart garage, narrow enough for one person to walk through.

Inside are organized shelves and cabinets full of recycled wood, broken light poles and broom handles. On his workbench, Manion had just finished transforming a neighbor's broken attic ladder into a step stool.

"You can use anything to create something else," Manion said.

He proudly showed me plastic CD cases that hung around the knobs of his garage closet doors. They once were used to keep CDs clean and smudge-free, and now they do the same for the closet door surface surrounding the knobs.

Every step we took toward the inside of Manion's house involved passing an item that has been made by him — a TV stand he is working on for a neighbor, bookshelves, art crafted from recycled wood.

"I would say 40 percent of the items in this house were probably made by me," Manion said.

His wife, Nancy, joined us on the tour and quickly pointed out a recycled-wood picture of a bridge from their hometown of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. Sections of the picture were chiseled out to add layers for perspective, giving it an effect so well done that Wile E. Coyote himself might have tried to walk under it.

"That was the bridge in our neighborhood. It was good for going through it, stopping and making out. The make-out bridge." Nancy said and smiled. "He really is incredible with this stuff."

Nancy and Manion have been married for 53 years. Stretching back farther though is Manion's love of building things.

Manion grew up in the small town of Springville Township, Pennsylvania, just outside of Phoenixville.

"I was 8 when I would take orange crates from the grocery



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John Manion at his home Monday in the Village of Lynnhaven, shows a replica of a RCA microphone stage prop he made for the Old Time Radio Club.

store and build shelves, or something with skateboard wheels underneath," he said.

Manion said he didn't have a building role model, but his parents did encourage his ingenuity—except one time.

"I once made a working crossbow. I got in a lot of trouble for that. I was 14 years old and it was a lethal weapon—a functional one, too," Manion said with more pride than shame in his teenage prowess.

Manion loved to design things, but engineering was not his first calling. He thought he wanted to go into veterinary medicine.

"I loved cats and dogs," Manion said.

At age 17, he worked at a local kennel and helped with basic treatments such as clipping nails and getting rid of fleas.

"I realized that fleas and ticks aren't the only problems dogs and cats suffer from," he said. "I knew I couldn't handle the emotional side of a dog being sick and dying."

So, he turned to design engineering. He engineered

die-cast metal frames, pressure vessels and boilers.

In 2005, the Manions moved to The Villages. For two years, Manion went without

designing much. He had just finished working and was looking for other things to do.

Eventually, he fulfilled an old passion of his by acting and

singing with the Off Broadway Players. But his penchant for design reasserted itself when a need for set design came about.

So he created set pieces for plays — bars, hotel desks and tables. It wasn't long until he started getting more personal requests such as kitchen cabinets, cabanas and pergolas.

"Just last week I had seven repair requests," Manion said. "One thing people really like about me — I come when I say I'm going to be there. If it's Wednesday at 2 p.m. I said I would be there, and I'm not there, check your obituaries, because I am probably dead."

Since 2007, he has made a lot of things for a lot of people and in some cases, he goes above and beyond what was asked.

Williams, of the Old Time Radio Drama Club, originally asked Manion for just a replica of the RCA 44bx. Manion took

it one step further and made it functional — actually, he made six of them over the course of six months.

"Designing and making many things, using whatever God-given talents and life experience I've had, gives me a sense of accomplishment and productivity," Manion said.

When it comes down to it, Manion is a smart guy with a big heart.

On my way out of Manion's house, we talked about how crucial the time element is when designing all of his various projects.

"I have the time here in The Villages to help," he said. "Use the time you've got."

Life is full of makers and wreckers. And time is limited. On that note, I think it's time Dad and I dusted off the old train set and did some building of our own.