

Behind the Scenes

with Kurt Hertzog



Kallenshaan Woods

When you see any of the more than fifty different designs of laser-cut pen kits that are manufactured by Kallenshaan Woods, you would think that they are a fairly large company. They advertise in all the wood-related magazines, have a booth at the major woodturning/penturning events, and have their products in the major retailers and mail-order catalogs. But, believe it or not, Kallenshaan Woods is actually a father and son team working out of their garage in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Ken Nelsen has been a woodworker his entire life. Always a multitasker, Ken did the woodworking and arts and crafts shows in addition to his regular job. Somewhere along the line (back in 1988, if his memory is correct), he saw a wooden pen at one of the shows. It was a walnut pen that was turned from a kit and cost twenty dollars; Ken bought one just to satisfy his curiosity.

Ken's fascination with that pen kit led him to track down the source and he found it at Craft Supplies. Back in the 1980s, pen kits were relatively high priced, but Ken went full tilt and started making pens from kits. He enjoyed making them much more than his typical products, such as yo-yos and lidded boxes. His full-time job as a show set technician for the Siegfried and Roy show yielded a willing customer group among the other workers in the building trades. Then when the Siegfried and Roy group took their extended vacations, the show hands from the visiting acts were so harried for time, a handcrafted gift (which was uncommon at the time) became a very popular item.

A job change took Ken to the Bellagio Hotel carpenter shop in 2000. While he was there, his previous employer needed help with a special project. The prop department of the Siegfried and Roy show needed a scale replica of the Epiphone Neil Diamond model acoustic guitar for a special event. Ken was solicited for the task. He knew that handcrafting wasn't going to provide the accuracy that was demanded, so Ken did all the necessary scaling and computer work to have the parts cut on a laser that was available through another company. The rest, as they say, is history.

Ken's replica guitar was such a big hit that Neil Diamond himself sent Ken a special thank you for such a great job. Seeing the potential of the laser in the wood-working industry, Ken purchased his own machine in 2003. He stumbled onto the Yahoo Penturners Group that year and heard about the pending Penturners Rendezvous

being planned for kickoff that year in Provo. (Note: We celebrated the 8th Annual Penturners Rendezvous this past year.) Ken attended that first event and didn't even have time to do new work—he actually borrowed work from people for whom he had done work in the past.

The bulk of his work was personalization of wooden products for others, but Ken soon began designing his first kit—the Stars and Stripes—and showed it the following year. It was first made in two different shades of wood, but Bill Baumbeck of Arizona Silhouette, asked him why it wasn't red, white, and blue? Ken said he didn't know where to get red-, white-, and blue-colored wood, so Bill hooked him up and a color explosion hit Ken's kits. The Piano kit was ready for the following year.

During all this time, Ken continued his full-time work in the carpenter shop at the Bellagio Hotel, as well as his arts and crafts circuit work. He even got the Bellagio to buy a laser for the carpenter shop; up until then, only the sign shop had a laser. Ken convinced the management that jigs, fixtures, and other timesavers could be created with the laser and would save them money. All the special events that needed customization, previously at the mercy of outside contractors, began being assigned to the carpenter shop. Ken found himself being the "laser guy" in the shop and worked full-time keeping it running for not only the carpenter shop, but also many other departments.

A few years ago, Ken hired his son Colin as his first full-time employee. Both of Ken's sons are mechanically inclined and adept with their hands. Ken attributes this to years of car racing in the backyard on their 40' x 300' motocross track. They've always built their own cars and spent much time repairing, rewiring, and modifying them. Colin also brought along some much-needed organization and CNC experience.

For the first two years, Colin helped streamline the operation, as well as produce product. With Colin there full-time and capable of everything from laser work to design, to website work, to packing product, Kallenshaan Woods was proficient enough to produce sufficient product to sell through retailers. The first company to pick them up was Craft Supplies. Rex Burningham and Ken had been in discussions for years, but Kallenshaan wasn't in a position to supply product in the quantities needed. With the process improvements and two people producing,

Kallenshaan was put in the *Woodturners Catalog*.

Since that time, Kallenshaan has expanded their product line to well over fifty different kits. All the major woodturning retailers and mail-order catalogs are carrying some or all of their product line. They had gotten so busy that Ken finally had to give up his full-time job and now works for Kallenshaan Woods full-time. The company employs 2-1/2 people now—there is a part-timer who works a few days a week cutting, drilling, and turning blanks.

What does the future hold? According to Ken, he'd like to continue to expand their offerings, but wants to stay small, at least personnel-wise. He thinks that they can continue their growth without hiring additional personnel and dealing with the issues it tends to bring. With the arrival of success comes the knockoffs, and they've been forced to begin copyrighting their designs.

Next time you see the Kallenshaan Woods product display rack in your favorite woodturning retailer or in their catalog, the expansive and very professional offerings may make you think they are some large company run by the nameless and faceless many. But nothing could be further from the truth—all that great stuff is the product of Ken and Colin Nelsen working in their garage in Las Vegas.



Fig. 1. When penturners think of laser-cut kits, Kallenshaan Woods, the creators of the multipiece laser-cut pen blank kit, comes to mind.



Fig. 2. You might be surprised to see that the Kallenshaan Woods corporate, manufacturing, and engineering offices are located in a garage in Las Vegas.



Fig. 3. Each and every kit is hand-fabricated from a wood block, so the requisite chop saws, lathes, drill presses, etc., adorn the shop.



Fig. 4. The business that Ken developed was laser engraving for personalization and, later, laser-cut pen blank kits.

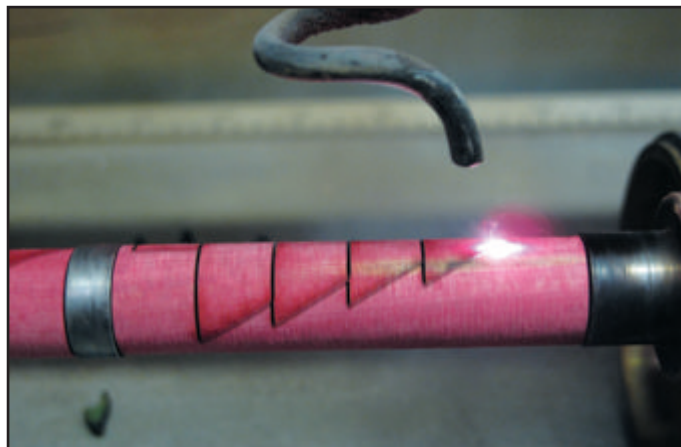


Fig. 5. Each wooden part for the various kits is cut from the appropriate colored species and from circular stock.



Fig. 6. The end result is a kit with brilliant colors and precision-fitting components that the end user can assemble and complete.

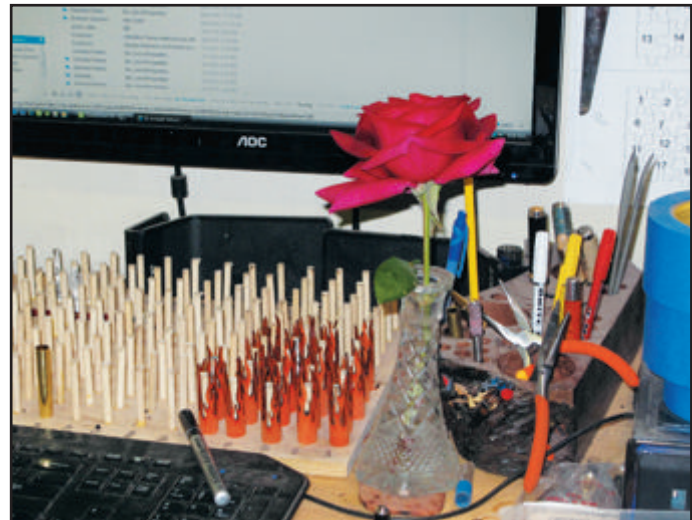


Fig. 9. Each of the different kits and the component parts are batch-processed to take full advantage of "mass production."



Fig. 7. Ken's son Colin (*right*) is the other full-timer and aids with all the tasks in the business, including design.

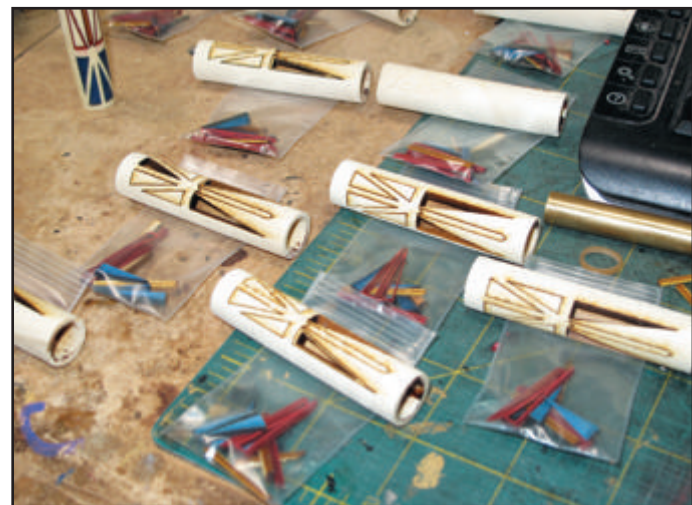


Fig. 10. Each and every kit has to be collated and packaged for the end customer.



Fig. 8. With over fifty kit designs and each design having upward of ten unique parts, organization and neatness are paramount.



Fig. 11. Looking at the caliber, quality, and expansiveness of the Kallenshaan Woods product line, it's hard to believe that the entire operation is housed in an oversized, two-car garage.