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# Giving Reclaimed Pallets a Second Chance

BY LEIGH MACMILLEN HAYES

**M**eet Amy Keene, who does just that at her business aptly named The Pallet Shop. After reading a brief blurb about Amy in a quarterly magazine produced by Keene State College, I asked about featuring her work in our spring “At Home” edition, but we’d already stuffed the magazine with interesting articles and Amy was expecting to give birth to twins, so the timing wasn’t right on both ends.

Four months later, the boys are full of smiles and coos and Amy is back at work—but only on Fridays. While many first time moms find it hard to break away from their babes for even one day, she’s all grins because she loves going to her studio.

Amy’s undergraduate and graduate work were in environmental science. Working with wood was in her blood because her parents are woodworkers. She knew she didn’t want to follow in their exact footsteps, but started building her own furniture on the side, all the while working full time for a design firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Her first creations were a headboard and end tables. It was Amy’s mother-in-law who encouraged her to sell similar items on Etsy and that was the beginning of a new journey for this talented woman. Eventually, she found herself working a 9-5 job with a 1.5 hour drive to and fro, plus working about the same number of hours on furniture. At one point, she built forty tables for the Commonwealth Restaurant in Cambridge.

The Pallet Shop is located in a unique place called The Open Bench Project along the Fore River at Thompson’s Point in Portland. Amy actually began her business from home when she lived in New Hampshire. Two years ago, she and her family moved to Maine and she discovered The Bench on Craig’s List.

Working at The Bench has allowed her much more flexibility. She rents studio space and pays a membership fee. In return, she has a 10x10’ area, about the size of a one-car garage, where she stores pallet slats, tools, prototypes and other items related to her endeavor. The best part is that while she works on a project, she can

explode into the common space at the front of the building, an open area where she and others can set up workbenches to complete bigger projects.

Behind the studios, she also has a variety of workshop space and tools available to her from welding to sandblasting. And even a paint booth/polyurethane room that she said is the only heated space in the winter.

The day I visited, the garage doors to the 7,000-square-foot warehouse were wide open and several people quietly went about their work. One of the benefits of this community makerspace is that collaboration takes place and, since giving birth to the boys, Amy is thankful for that opportunity. She showed me a bed that she and a fellow carpenter have built for a client. The headboard is constructed of mostly oak and maple pallet slats, while the frame was built by her colleague David, owner of Hopkinton Family Furniture.

So why pallets? “It’s junk,” said Amy, “and an important resource of wood.” Her environmentally-conscious mind winced at the thought of this natural resource being discarded. “There’s some nice wood,” she said. “I’m trying to turn junk into treasures. Plus I can screw up many times, because it’s free, until I get it right.”

Knowing that reclaimed objects are popular, she’s become a self-described pallet connoisseur. On a drive-by, she’s learned to tell which ones to take and which to avoid, especially those that are splintered. One of the things that’s important to her is that the pallet slats not be chemically treated and she can tell that by whether or not they are painted.

The type of wood doesn’t matter, but she prefers to find and use a mix of hard and softwoods in her projects. Amy does have several reliable sources that she chooses not to leak. Each pallet has a brand, so it’s easy for her to determine its point of origin and know how it was dried. She’d rather work with wood that was heat treated or kiln dried.

Even the finish is of a natural nature in keeping with her attempts to be environmen-



tally conscious—she uses shellac for most items since it’s a natural product made from a secretion from the female lac bug combined with a solvent such as alcohol. Once dried and hardened, it provides a safe coating.

Because pallets are left outside, she tries to gather some ahead of time to take apart and let dry. In the welding shop, she created a pallet buster, which she uses to leverage the pallets and wrench them apart. I suggested she patent it. She smiled and shook her head back and forth.

Through many hours of labor—some of it painstaking and downright sweaty—especially those spent stacking pallets into and out of her truck’s bed and taking them apart, she transforms these bases that were meant to support freight into beautiful, functional works of art. Though she enjoys making standard items, such as the headboards and night stands, it’s the custom jobs that really get her juices flowing.

When I first walked into The Bench, I noticed a table-topped dolly. For someone who likes the industrial look, Amy transformed a vintage Fairbanks wooden dolly by laying it down and topping it with a salvaged wood surface. It’s a low table meant to go with a low-riding sofa.

And sometimes, it isn’t just pallets. With the slats of a whisky barrel, she’s built a bar stool that she hopes a local meadery will purchase to accompany the 55-foot pallet bar she constructed for their new tasting room. What about the rings on the barrel? They’ve been incorporated into the design to add support and rigidity.

One challenge has been to develop a way to ship items to customers. At first, Amy delivered her creations pre-assembled. She’d drive all around New England and charge the customers for gas. Knowing the condition of the item when it arrived was important to her. It still is, but after trying various ways to box a piece with legs that will be easy for the customer to assemble, she’s hit on a magic formula and ships via FedEx.

What else does she build? When I asked this question, her eyes focused upward and she thought for a second. Turns out she went on a mental journey through her home—desks, kitchen tables, night stands, coffee tables, media consoles, bookcases, pet feeding station. But, her favorite projects—something new. “I like custom projects,” said Amy.

Each item features her wood-burned logo sizzled onto it. She waved the electric branding iron in front of me and I commented,

“Those twins had better be well behaved.”

At the end of the day, Amy is thankful for the pallet journey that presented itself. “I was doing the rat race. The career thing. Long drive. Good salary. Good benefits. Too much. Some people are too busy earning a

living to make a life. I’d rather make my life.”

And she’d be happy to make something for your life by giving a pallet a second chance. 🌟

The Pallet Shop, Amy Keene, owner  
[www.etsy.com/shop/thepalletshop](http://www.etsy.com/shop/thepalletshop)  
[www.thepalletshop.me](http://www.thepalletshop.me)

