

SHOP TALK

VetsTurn: Helping Heal PTSD Through Turning

By Paul Mayer



Here VetsTurn founder Paul Mayer teaches a spindle-turning class to VetsTurn learners via Zoom from his home workshop.

Online influencer and many other sponsors provide training and tools.

Some U.S. combat veterans face a challenging reality when they transition to life back home, as is evidenced by the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and alarming suicide rates. While I haven't served in the military, I often have contemplated these challenges and wondered what I could do to help.

Showing off her turned walnut mallet is Christine, a 2020 VetsTurn participant.

I'm a hobbyist woodworker and woodturner with an active social media presence and a YouTube channel (all under the name "ToolMetric"), and I felt that something positive could surely be done for veterans through my platform.

When I reached out to the woodturning and veteran communities for guidance, I met several veterans who credit woodturning as a crucial part of readjusting to civilian life. For instance, Burle Christopherson, a former Army ranger, explained to me that "turning is the only activity I've found that can consistently get my mind to a peaceful place. I literally cannot stay stressed and turn wood at the same time."

Program Goal, Benefits

Through conversations with other veterans who felt the same way, I was inspired to start the "VetsTurn" program two years ago. The goal of VetsTurn is to promote woodturning as a way to help combat veterans reduce the negative effects of PTSD.

This veteran-focused non-profit Project 147 helps identify combat veteran recipients. Each selected veteran receives a full woodturning setup that includes a new midi lathe, an assortment of tools, wood, other supplies and training materials.

The woodturning community has also stepped up to support VetsTurn in meaningful ways. I've been thrilled to receive sponsorships from several well-known companies, including Easy Wood Tools, TeknaTool (NOVA) and Rockler Woodworking and Hardware. Through social media exposure, several other vendors and individuals provide support as well. They have offered mentorship, supplies and money to help enhance the program.

When I launched VetsTurn in 2019, three veterans received woodturning awards. Feedback from them was overwhelmingly positive. "Woodturning has proven to be a great art form to help me relax and clear



Turning a bowl on his midi lathe is Patrick, one of last year's five VetsTurn participants.



Gordon, a 2020 VetsTurn recipient, shows the bowl he turned from thermally modified ash.



Omar, a 2019 VetsTurn recipient (left) works with volunteer woodturning mentor James Carter.

my thoughts," says Omar Gonzalez, a 2019 VetsTurn recipient. "When I'm peeling beautiful ribbons of wood, I feel a deep sense of peace, calmness and satisfaction."

Now a Shared Platform

Through increased community support, VetsTurn welcomed five new recipients last year. As I had hoped, VetsTurn is shifting from being "my" program to becoming a shared platform that allows interested members of the woodturning community — whether that be a vendor or individual — to extend support to veterans in whatever form they choose. I continue to serve as VetsTurn coordinator, promoter and instructor, while members of the community are supporting the program in other ways:

- The owner of a Chicago-based retail store coordinated a significant fundraising event to sponsor a VetsTurn recipient this year. It will allow the program to serve one more veteran.
- A woodworking company sponsored the cost of an additional recipient last year.
- Several suppliers have donated some beautiful turning stock and project kits.
- Nationally, some wood-

turning clubs have offered free memberships and in-person support to recipients.

A professional woodturner drove five hours round-trip and donated two days of private instruction to a 2019 recipient. The personal outreach was meaningful, and the results of this training were outstanding.

Training and Support

Training and ongoing support are key to helping the recipients quickly and safely gain the skills needed for a variety of projects. Well-known influencer/woodturners George Vondriska and Ashley Harwood have donated a set of in-depth training videos. Last year, to provide personalized training in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we began to offer free online training sessions to cover basic skills.

During these sessions, group members could also bring items that they'd turned for "show and tell," and plenty of time was allotted for questions and answers. The recipients have expressed a strong interest in continuing these online sessions, and I believe it will continue to be an important element of the program.

Getting Involved

When I hear the positive stories that result from VetsTurn and see the beautiful pieces our turners are creating, I'm humbled and inspired. I hope to continue to grow VetsTurn to serve even more vets in the future.

To follow the progress of VetsTurn and see the work produced by our program's recipients so far, subscribe/follow ToolMetric on YouTube, Instagram and Facebook. If you are interested in helping with this program or providing a donation, feel free to reach out to me at VetsTurn@Toolmetric.com.



VetsTurn's mission is to help recovering combat veterans, such as David, a 2019 participant, find peace and healing through woodturning.



Each veteran receives a complete woodturning starter setup that includes a midi lathe, turning tools, chuck, face shield, wood and other supplies.