

Ellie Richards

When you look at the family tree that connects us in the studio furniture and woodworking field, Doug Sigler's name appears at the top and the names of many, many of makers, teachers, and artists flow through him. On the flipside, when you search Doug's name on the internet he is almost impossible to find. Of course, locating him on the internet is completely irrelevant, I suppose it speaks to his style and ability to remain a key beam in the structure of our community without leaning into any of the social media constructs. Through and through he is a people person, a person most people don't forget. I came to know Doug in my first few days as a Studio Coordinator at Penland as he made a point to stop by and introduce himself. I didn't know anything about him upon our first meeting and was left with a great amount of curiosity, who was this gruff man who stood tall and even on our first meeting treated me as though I was one of his oldest friends he could jostle with jokes and share personal stories about back in the day with. I really looked forward to the next visit.

Getting to know Penland and the surrounding community and environment went hand in hand with my conversations with Doug and the interactions we had. Each visit was a history lesson filled with stories about the early days of the Penland school, how the programs began to evolve, and how this aligned with the way his personal interests shifted from making furniture to making houses. During all of our talks I never heard himself refer to as one of the founders of the studio but indeed it was him and Skip Johnson, a former teacher of his, who put together some machines in a small space underneath the ceramics studio that got us started. Doug is one of the greatest story tellers I've ever encountered (I don't think he would ever think of reading a speech in the way I'm doing now), everything he described was filled with humor, vitality, and a great appreciation for human nature and our ability to work together. While it is true, that Doug was repeat story offender these were not rehearsed and came from a place of pure joy found in getting someone excited and riled up.

When summer classes were in full swing and I got into a pinch with a particular tool or species of wood that was needed, Doug was the first person I would call to source out these issues. Usually it was him who had what we needed and although I never needed an excuse to go visit, I always jumped at another reason to hop in the car and make the drive to his studio and house just 15 minutes away. It meant getting off campus and cruising down the windy dirt road of Conley Ridge (located down near the barns), stopping midway to take in one of the best vantage points of the mountains surrounding Penland. The drive continues by crossing a few structurally questionable bridges that lead to more dirt roads making way to his elevated property with a pretty magnificent view. I learned quickly to block out more time than needed because going to Kathy and Doug's was an experience in and of itself that need not be rushed.

Doug gave me the open invitation to extend to any of the wood instructors to tour his property and some of the houses he built alongside Bruce Anderson. So a visit usually went something like this:

First we would hang down in his wood studio, somewhat of time capsule filled with old machines and relics that were in covered dust and cobwebs but any woodworker would know they were still very tuned well and completely in use. He would always share what he was currently working on, maybe retweaking and making an old table design, maybe fixing a door for one of his buildings, or perhaps laying a final coat of oil onto one his beefy and beautiful butcherblocks. But, even before he showed us anything about what he was doing he made sure we had a cold drink in our hands. For this, he would reach into his vintage coke machine and pull out mini cokes or coronas to share. Neither of these drinks interest me on the day to day but at Doug's I feel as though I never tasted anything more refreshing.

The best was when he would give a small demo on something he was doing, on one day he was using hide glue to set canvas on the back of some tambour doors. Another time he talked to us about the ramifications of kiln drying wood too fast. This is the type of knowledge and experience that simply can't be found on the internet.

After the first few tours I got the swing of things and Doug let me lead everybody around and point out all the treasures as though I had anything to do with them. I feel this made him proud when I was able to take the reins and perform some of his tricks. I'd show everyone the picture he had in his drafting room of him and former president Jimmy Carter. I'd point out all of the cool wood samples piled up and then I'd head over to the old bandsaw, flip it open, give everybody a good laugh with the bikini models stickered onto the wheel staring back at us. We'd get lost in his wood collection then climb the stairs to the he and Kathy's home.

His wife Kathy is so generous to have opened up their home to us, always on short notice. imagine a curious group of penland students snooping around your home, even bedroom, because the beds he made are some of the best!

His house is a museum to the artful wooden object. Kathy collected antiques so even the furniture that is not made by close friends is super interesting.

Doug taught Furniture Design at RIT for thirty years, one of the assignments he gave students was to make a production item that could be repeated easily. He has a whole cabinet of finely made special and clever wood objects.

Doug made houses and developed several signature touches including an exclusive use of Cherry wood, massive dovetails, a board and batton exterior, and he always made a special cubby inserted into the wall for toilet paper.

We were all shook when we found out about the car accident he suffered a major neck injury from last year. The man is very strong and made a physical recovery that enabled him to continue act like his old self. Months later he suffered a stroke which left half of his body paralyzed. This still didn't stop him from keeping his spirits up. When visiting him he was so excited to show us the cane one of his friends had made him in the shape of a saw. Even with the left side of his body in forced stillness he made us laugh

and smile so much. I sat on his bed and ate the popcorn I brought for him and we gossiped about people. Everyone who was coming to see Doug was telling him all of their secrets and Doug was dispersing the secrets to us ... all in good fun.

When I think about Doug at this time I see how strong this man was over his time. To be a lifelong maker, to be passionate about educating, and to use his broad hands each day to manipulate and move material – it is a life many of us hope for. Doug's vocational pursuit led to amazing friendships with stories, spaces, and objects worth sharing over and over.

And this is what I want for us in the room: to ask how does what we do in the studio reverberate into the world? All moments can have significance in our lives and recognizing them when they come can lead to possibilities for growth, optimism, and positive change that lives on beyond our time.

To Doug.