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CENTERPIECE

Full Circle — Virginia Craftsmen Returns To Hardest-Higgins

By IAN MUNRO Daily News-Record Mar 2, 2019



Roy Swartz signs a handbill for Carole Downey, of Harrisonburg, a fan of Virginia Craftsmen's products, at the Hardesty-Higgins House on Friday.

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HARRISONBURG — The Great Depression did not yield growth for many in early 1930s America. But business for the Virginia Craftsmen was booming so much that it opened a showroom in downtown Harrisonburg.

Today, that building is called the Hardesty-Higgins House, and after three decades away, Virginia Craftsmen returned on Friday to formally reopen a showroom.

The Hardesty-Higgins House is also home to tourism offices, a visitor center, gift shop, the Heritage Bakery and Cafe, the Valley Turnpike Museum, and a Civil War Orientation Center.

The Zirkle Library at the house is now adorned with handmade bed posts, chairs and cabinets that showcase the artistry and history of the artisan company.

Virginia Craftsmen was once headquartered in a workshop on South High Street with 40 employees. Today, Roy Swartz, 73, still carries the torch in a small Hinton workshop.

In this small family business, Swartz restores and refinishes handmade pieces from across the state. He also continues to build furniture and maintain old designs for over 4,000 pieces.

"I'm working on pieces [that] I worked on when I was 18," Swartz said.

Over the years, the furniture market has changed a great deal, Swartz said.

"It's a small niche in the marketplace for beautiful handmade furniture," he said.

Carole Downey, 64, of Harrisonburg, used to frequent the the Virginia Craftsmen showroom in downtown during her youth and fell in love with the furniture.

"I've been wanting a piece since then," she said.

Her husband bought her a small Virginia Craftsmen table last Christmas, and "it was really a dream come true," she said.

This passion inspired her to not only attend Friday's event, but to get a signature from Swartz.

"I had to come today," she said.

The homecoming of Virginia Craftsmen didn't happen overnight, said Roy's son, Ryan Swartz.

Though the Virginia Craftsmen opened the showroom at the Hardesty Higgins House in 1931, the company left in 1988 and shortly went defunct, Roy Swartz said.

Swartz bought the designs for the pieces in 1991 and Ryan and his wife, Ashley, helped Roy to re-register the trademark the Virginia Craftsmen in 2013, Roy Swartz said.

The Swartz family and the Harrisonburg Tourism office had been in contact for months to try and create something collaborative for the space the tourism office once occupied.

The hours of the showroom will be the same as the Hardesty Higgins House.

"The goal with this event is to promote local artisans and craftspeople," Ryan Swartz said, "and a community where people pull together to make the community stronger."

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