Soul-Soothing Satisfaction

Law certainly has its satisfactions. Too often, though, our professional pursuits lack the soul-soothing satisfaction that the seasoned soul seeks: the feeling of bringing something pretty and good from what was nothing or nearly nothing. Bakers know that feeling when they craft a three-tiered wedding cake from flour, water, eggs and sugar. Landscapers know it when they carve a sculpted oasis from a weed-choked lot. Carpenters, woodworkers, furniture makers know it.

Those who know me only from court, the law office or the classroom might be surprised to learn that I fancy myself all three of the latter. Nothing gives me the same sense of accomplishment and satisfaction as plucking some old and nasty furniture piece from a neighborhood trash pile and giving it new life or crafting a chair, cabinet or table from scratch.

This inner need to create with my own hands must run in the genes. Great-great-grandfather Holly Brooks Wilkinson was a skilled carpenter. The wood-framed cottage he built for his family of 10 children in White Castle, La., at the end of the 19th century still stands near a bend on the Old River Road. Grandfather George Mathews Wilkinson was the blacksmith, carpenter and bookkeeper on The Island sugar cane plantation in Plaquemine, La., in the 1930s, long before the plantation was transformed into the upscale golf course community that stands there today. By profession, my Dad was a process draftsman with a distinguished career in the engineering wing of the offshore oil industry. By avocation and acts of love, Dad was also a carpenter and woodworker who renovated, remodeled and refurbished our little family home and almost all of its furniture in Terrytown, La., in his spare time during my childhood and young adulthood in the 1960s and 70s.

I guess some of this must have rubbed off on me. I had fooled around with furniture refurbishment for years, but the real rub did not manifest itself in me until 2009, about a year after Dad died. “I feel the need to work with wood,” I confided to my sister one night when I saw her on her evening stroll. “I think I know where that need is coming from.”

“I understand,” she said.

I unpacked Dad’s old tools and started with a few simple bookcases, one a 6-by-4-footer hewn from strong white birch purchased at the local Lowe’s. I finished it with a fancy wood trim, then painted it bright enamel white, to hold the law books kept in my little home study. Two smaller cases followed for the bedrooms of my 11-year-old and 3-year-old granddaughters.

One Saturday morning, I spotted an old bedroom dresser in the curbside trash pile outside what people in the neighborhood say was once the home of the late Judge Julian Samuel of the
Louisiana 4th, then 5th, Circuit Court of Appeal. It was being discarded as the house was being prepared for sale. The dresser’s back, sides and bottom were made of cheap particle board and were water damaged, cracked and peeling, but the top and front were gorgeous, salvageable oak. Like a junk collector, I loaded it into the back of my Infiniti hatchback and deposited it under my backyard carport. There, I spent months gutting and rebuilding its foundation with the same fine birch; replacing the bottom dresser drawers with built-from-scratch cabinet doors; stripping the good old oak, staining and varnishing old and new to match; topping the former dresser with a new glass-doored cabinet for china display; trimming it all with nickel hardware; then delivering it to Daughter No. 1’s dining room.

I followed up the china cabinet for Daughter No. 1 with a pair of twin display cabinets for the “feature wall” in Daughter No. 2’s living room, where she proudly displays her wedding photos, pictures of my granddaughters and treasured family knick-knacks. A fancy television cabinet for our Florida beach condo, finished with a rich Bombay mahogany stain, was next.

One recent night, my wife and I attended a dinner party hosted by a nice young couple she knew from work, truly good people. Their half-double New Orleans home was packed with three young children, their toys, books and musical instruments and an eclectic collection of good but aging furniture. One chair in their little living room attracted my particular attention. It was sagging and completely covered by a knitted afghan to hide its ripped and worn fabric, exposed and shredded stuffing, broken springs and faded woodwork. “Don’t sit on that,” our hostess said to one of her guests as he began to lower himself into it. “You’ll sink straight to the floor. It has no seat. I really ought to haul it to the dump, but I’ve had it since my college dorm days, and I can’t stand to part with it.”

“I can fix that,” I said quietly. “It’s a hobby of mine.” She delivered it to my carport workspace about a week later. “Feel free to toss it in the trash whenever you decide it’s hopeless” were the owner’s parting words.

Over the course of a month of weekends and pre-office early mornings, I peeled off the torn old fabric, its ratty stuffing and broken seat springs. I yanked its old staples and tacks, dismantled its wooden base and legs from its arms, back and what was left of its seat. I stripped off the worn stain and reduced the chair to its bare wooden skeleton, split into two separate pieces.

Resurrection began with a rebuilt birch seat bottom and a fancy wood trim around its base. The old stuffing was replaced with thick, fitted Space Age technology foam. I reattached the disassembled pieces. The owner had picked out a cheerful royal blue fabric with a bold old gold pattern resembling the tie-dying decor of 1960s hippies. I snipped and reassembled the new fabric into place, hand driving tacks and staples, piecing it all together like a jigsaw puzzle, stretching, tightening and stuffing it all into comfortable, living room attractiveness. I finished it off with a braided two-tone trim, known to upholstering aficionados as “gimp.”
When I delivered the finished product to the owners, they were virtually speechless. They placed their toddler daughter in the seat and snapped her photo for a future scrapbook. Later, the owner sent me a two-part thank you note: “I posted the ‘before and after’ pictures on Facebook an hour ago, and I’ve already received 50 ‘likes’ and eight requests for your furniture renovation business information . . . . I just can’t get over it. It’s beautiful. I’ve dragged this chair all over the country and it’s the only piece of furniture I’ve personally kept these 18 years. You gave it new life. I’m so honored. Well done.”

Ahhh! Satisfaction — of the soul-soothing variety.

Joseph C. (Jay) Wilkinson, Jr. is chief United States magistrate judge in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana in New Orleans, where he has served for 21 years. He worked in the court in several other capacities for three years and practiced law for 11 years. He is a 1980 graduate of Tulane Law School and earned his BA degree in 1976 from Louisiana State University. (jay_wilkinson@laed.uscourts.gov; 500 Poydras St., Room B-409, New Orleans, LA 70130)

Photo:
The College Chair: Before and After.