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## Woodworker's ways deeply ingrained

By Eve Mitchell

EMERYVILLE — Rene Almon has carved out a fine life for herself.

As a woodworker, she meticulously crafts carefully selected woods into custom-designed furniture, urns and caskets.

Wood has always been important in her life. She loves the grain, the touch, the smell of it.

Over the last two decades, she has worked as cabinetmaker, boat builder and furniture maker. Five years ago, she opened her own shop: Rene Almon Woodworks.

In 2003, she took a business-training course offered by the San Francisco-based **Women's Initiative for Self Employment**.

Almon's interest in wood and woodworking began as a child. As a 10-year-old kid living in New Hampshire, she built a wooden toy box for her little sister.

"I just like putting things together," said Almon, a 43-year-old Alameda resident. "I didn't have my father show me or something. It just came to me."

By the eighth-grade, she had saved up enough money made from mowing lawns and a paper route to buy a small table saw for making furniture. While in high school, she sold her first piece of work — a colonial-styledry sink — to a friend's mother.

The shop Almon works out of today has woods of all hues and textures stashed in piles, including some planks she brought along with her after moving 12 years ago to California from the East Coast.

"As you can see, I'm a collector of wood," said Almon, with a laugh. "I have a hard time throwing out beautiful wood. If I go to a lumber yard and I have money in my pocket and I see a beautiful board, I buy it."

Her furniture, intricately fashioned out of fine woods, has been sold in galleries and at art shows throughout California.

It was the death of a friend in 2002 that motivated Almon to begin making coffins and urns.

"She was also a woodworker. I made a cremation urn for her. She's the angel on my bench," said Almon.

The experience prompted Almon to want to provide people with an alternative to dealing with buying urns and caskets from funeral homes.

While some of her furniture pieces have sold for several thousand dollars, the urns sell for between \$300 and \$500 and caskets from \$300 to \$1,000.

In addition to having a space for ashes, the urns have built-in compartments for storing mementos.

Sometimes it's the wood itself that serves as the inspiration for the kind of furniture Almon makes.

One of her works is a meditation cabinet. It has a drawer for incense and candles, and features doors made out of spalted maple. Spalting is a process that creates an attractive dark coloring

over some of the wood's grain, offsetting it from a lighter color.

"It's when there is fungus and minerals in the wood. It's sort of like when it begins to rot," she said. "That's where the black comes from. I had this spalted maple, and I had these veneers and wanted to use them."

The project also made it possible to learn how to create complicated joints for the cabinet.

All her life, Almon knew she wanted to work with wood.

Almon was born in Schenectady, N.Y., where her dad was a machinist in the Navy. The family travelled around, ending up in Exeter, N.H. It was there in the tool-filled basement of the family home that Almon started working with wood as a 10-year-old.

While she later took woodworking classes in high school, Almon also did a lot of reading on her own on the subject.

"I definitely knew I wanted to build cabinets and furniture," she said.

Her first job out of high school was working at a cabinet-making shop.

At around that time, she had saved up enough money to buy a larger table saw, which went into her parent's garage.

I took over their garage. They couldn't park their car in the garage because I had bought the big table saw," said Almon.

After working for about 10 years in cabinet shops in New Hampshire, Almon decided to give boat-building a shot. She enrolled in the Landing School of Boatbuilding and Design in Arundel, Maine.

That led to work at a boatyard in Rhode Island, where she helped build an America's Cup boat that competed in the 1992 races.

"It was exciting, and I made good money and worked with good guys," said Almon.

She then moved to California to study at the College of the Redwoods in Fort Bragg. The school offers a certificate program through an internationally renowned woodworking program.

"It was the best two years of my life. It was like heaven. What I loved about it is that all the people who are there are passionate about woodworking. Everyone wants to be there," she said.

After completing the course work, Almon moved to the East Bay in 1995 and worked in a cabinet-making shop. Three years later, she went back to New Hampshire to take a furniture-making job before returning to the Bay Area and opening her own business.

"One winter tamed me," she said. "I love being in my shop, and I love being inspired."

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