



Local craftsmen for Lowcountry Habitat for Humanity create beautiful, handcrafted furniture for a good cause

By Mindy Lucas

Think you have to go to Charleston or High Point, N.C., for beautifully made, handcrafted outdoor furniture? Think again.

A group of local craftsmen and women are turning out porch and patio pieces that are quickly becoming the envy of backyards and porches everywhere. And the best part of all? It's for a good cause.

Called the Beaufort Collection, the furniture line is made exclusively by volunteers for Lowcountry Habitat for Humanity.

As Jenny Drake, manager for the nonprofit's ReStore explains, it all started with longtime Habitat volunteer, Milton Lawrence.

A construction supervisor for the nonprofit's construction sites, Lawrence was a highly skilled woodworker as well. After deciding to donate his tools to the organization, Lawrence suddenly had something of an epiphany.

"He said, maybe we could use my tools to make a product to sell," Drake recalls.

Lawrence had been reminiscing about a time when people used to sit on front porches or watch the kids play from the front porch swing, she said.



So the tools were donated, and an idea for the "new product" – a front porch swing – was born. Soon Lawrence, who has since moved away, and other volunteers were making other pieces such as chairs and side tables as well.

"It kind of took on a life of its own," she said.

Now more than a decade in the making, the idea has grown and expanded to an entire

collection including chairs, side tables, high top tables, benches, rocking chairs, Adirondack chairs and similar pieces.

Wood and materials for the projects are donated by area builders who sometimes wind up with excess materials, so the volunteers are not only turning out beautifully made pieces for a good cause, they're recycling material that might otherwise wind up in the landfill.

Making handcrafted furniture for sale is something that is unique to the Lowcountry Habitat affiliate, says Drake.

"It's not that others don't do something similar; they might have a crew that likes to build something, but this isn't something Habitat restores usually do," she said. "But it's very cool and (our volunteers) take a lot of pride in it, and are very talented at it," she said.

Proceeds from sales of the Beaufort Collection go toward the mission of building Habitat for Humanity homes, Drake said.

To date, the Lowcountry affiliate has built or rehabbed 52 homes in northern Beaufort County, which has, in



turn, provided safe, affordable housing for 66 adults and 135 children.

It's a mission volunteers like Ken Crooke (right) are proud to be part of.

"Now that I'm retired I'm able to have some free time and give back to my community," he said.

Crooke, who leads the crew, says he has also enjoyed the camaraderie of the group. Volunteers work about two to three days a week at the Habitat warehouse where they gather to work on projects.

A former mechanical engineer who built power plants all over the world before retiring, Crooke said he started working with the group a little over three years ago after a friend told him about the work.

"He said maybe you'd want to come down," he said. "He knew I'd worked on a lot of other types of projects – building houses, repairing antique clocks."

What he found was a group of highly skilled men and women, all with varying backgrounds. Some were good at woodworking and coming up with special designs. Others were good at painting and finishing work.

But the one thing they all seemed to have in common was working together toward a common cause and having a good time while doing it.

"We're always joking around. It's not by any means a serious, daily work day, but it's always a good laugh. And when we're working on something, we're always helping each other," he said.

While the group has made pieces to sell at ReStore, most are made to order. They keep sets of plans and patterns on hand for the various pieces they craft and may make modifications or tweaks as they go.

In addition to the furniture line, the volunteers also make custom-made pieces for customers who appreciate the work and want to donate to a good cause. The group recently completed a built-in desk, for example, and are working on a 16-foot work bench for another customer.

The shop has been closed lately due to the pandemic, but volunteers are expecting to be open again soon and can't wait to get back to work, Crooke said.

"It's a good crew of people," he said. "It's been a lot of fun and I've enjoyed it."

Check it Out!

To see just some of the pieces in the Beaufort Collection, visit www.lowcountryhabitat.org/rest-ore/the-beaufort-collection-our-porch-swing-story

. Pieces range from \$35 for a small table, to \$225 for a bench or porch swing, and depend on the type of material. Proceeds from sale of the furniture go toward building Habitat for Humanity homes.

The ReStore, which has been closed recently due to the pandemic, is expected to open soon. For updates on when the store will open, visit the LowCountry Habitat for Humanity Facebook page.