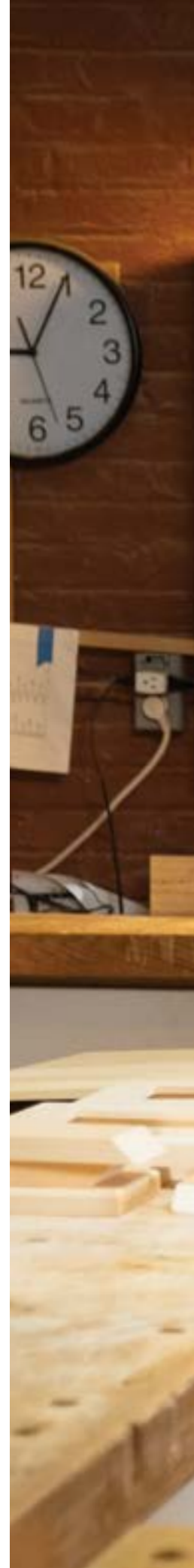

BUILDING FUTURES

Through Brooklyn Woods, **Scott Peltzer '82** is teaching job hunters a lost art and self-sustaining skills for life. **BY BEN SEAL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GABBI BASS**

The wooden benches outside the Oculus at the World Trade Center bend and swoop as if they're in motion. There are a dozen of them, each built by hand, bringing warmth and comfort to an otherwise austere pedestrian plaza. On the day the benches were installed this spring, passersby stopped to admire their beauty. Here was real skill on display: Each of the black locust boards had to be steamed at just the right temperature and bent to shape to achieve the benches' distinctive curve. For **Scott Peltzer '82**, director of Brooklyn Woods, the nonprofit that partnered with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey on the project, the moment was less about the benches than it was about the group of individuals who had built them—all of them formerly incarcerated, most of them brand new to the process of woodworking. Just 10 weeks earlier, when they began this project, they were rookies. Most had hardly even touched a hammer. But with Peltzer's training and guidance, they quickly developed the skill to create something special.

As the seven men and one woman set to work assembling the benches on-site, Peltzer felt





SCOTT PELTZER '82 FOUNDED Brooklyn Woods, in part, to fill the void of vocational and technical training that schools used to offer. Students get hands-on experience building furniture, even if they've never picked up a hammer.



A TEAM OF EIGHT BROOKLYN WOODS STUDENTS, most of whom were novice woodworkers, made and installed 12 of these black locust benches at the World Trade Center Oculus. The boards used to assemble the benches had to be steamed and bent to achieve their distinctive curve.



palpable excitement from them. Then, as compliments from strangers came rolling in, he says, “You could see all the participants well up with pride.”

This was Peltzer’s ultimate goal when he co-founded Brooklyn Woods 25 years ago. His intention was that the nonprofit would offer free woodworking and fabrication training to New Yorkers who faced barriers to other kinds of employment. Peltzer ended up not just building furniture, but building up people. Today, through hands-on education, he and his colleagues teach students an appreciation for craft, the knowledge to build things by hand, and the tools to find stable work.

SAWDUST AND SECOND CHANCES

Eric Pagan was among the group who built and installed the Oculus benches. Just months removed from an eight-year prison sentence when he joined Brooklyn Woods, Pagan had carpentry experience but had never been in a woodshop before. The chance to learn a new trade—one that would let him put his hands to work—caught his attention. He was accepted into Brooklyn Woods’ selective program (only 15 out of around 50 applicants make the cut) and got to work. By the end of the project, Pagan knew just how much he had to offer.

In their 10 weeks with Peltzer, Pagan and his classmates learned the safety, measurement, and hand skills necessary to find full-time employment in woodworking, cabinetmaking, or fabrication, all while building pieces as elegant as the Oculus benches. The process of turning raw wood into a refined finished product—creating something out of nothing—was restorative for Pagan. “I felt like part of me was being recreated,” he says. “Going through this program, I was revived.” Now, he can see that he has a place in society. “There’s so much out there for me,” he says.

Pagan is in good company. More than 1,000 students have graduated from Brooklyn Woods’ training program since Peltzer, a furniture maker and teacher, started the organization with Patricia Manzione, who later departed. Many of the students who walk into Peltzer’s shop have an inconsistent work history, low level of education, or experience with the criminal justice system in their recent past—the types of employment barriers that New York’s workforce development funding aims to help people overcome. To be accepted into the Brooklyn

Woods program, students must go through a series of interviews and tests to ensure they’re ready to take advantage of the program.

Peltzer and his colleagues at Brooklyn Woods teach students how to use handheld power tools and standard woodworking machinery, such as a drill press, band saw, planer, and jointer. They also provide education in math and measurements, as well as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration certification required to work on a job site. Perhaps as important as anything else, the training, which typically lasts seven weeks and is held quarterly, includes a job-readiness component that addresses resume building and workplace basics. It culminates in a series of mock interviews

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with employers—some of whom are actually ready to hire. Brooklyn Woods supports students with job placement for two years after graduation.

“We’re really trying to place people into careers—jobs that have a career ladder and that can put them on the road to self-sustainability, a living wage, and support for their families,” Peltzer says. “That is of paramount importance to us.”

CARVING A NEW PATH

Peltzer grew up making things with his hands in Eugene, Ore., where his favorite high school classes all took place in a shop. He majored in art history at Haverford—a precursor, in his mind, to a career in architecture—and structured his independent studies around furniture making and wood carving. After college, he moved to New York, where he apprenticed with a cabinetmaker for a few years before earning a master of fine arts in sculpture at the State University of New York at Purchase in Westchester County. He spent time teaching and working at an architectural millwork shop, until he was hired in the early 1990s to develop a woodworking training program for a Bronx-based nonprofit that made furniture out of recycled pallets.

Building Futures

Through that experience and his time in the profession, Peltzer realized there was a dearth of vocational training available for young woodworkers. As high schools became laser-focused on preparing students for college, the classes and programs that had once inspired him were going by the wayside, even in his own high school. He still remembers walking into schools in New York with “beautiful metal and woodshops” that lay vacant. “There was a real need to be filled,” he says, and he stepped up to do so.

Peltzer launched Brooklyn Woods as a nonprofit in 2000, and he now trains 60 people a year in the program. In 2006, it merged with Brooklyn Workforce Innovations, a separate nonprofit that now houses eight different job training programs with similar aims.

Early on in its run, Brooklyn Woods partnered with Habitat for Humanity to install kitchen cabinets in the housing units it was building, which led Brooklyn Woods to spin off a for-profit arm—Peltzer calls it a “social venture”—that builds accessible kitchens and bathrooms for developers across the city. Combined with the training program, it’s expanded the organization’s reach and given graduates a place to continue honing their skills for pay. Since 2009, it has paid close to \$1.2 million in wages to 139 Brooklyn Woods graduates on the path toward more sustainable long-term work, including Pagan, who is now part of an eight-person team fabricating 68 kitchens for an affordable housing development.

Jeff Barron, whose company, Barronarts, builds custom stretcher frames, strainers, and panels for artists, museums, and galleries, has been hiring Brooklyn Woods graduates for more than 15 years. Six of his eight current employees are alumni of the program, which Barron says is “an incredibly direct conduit” between developing woodworkers and the businesses that need their skills. And its emphasis on those who might otherwise struggle to find work makes it all the more meaningful.

“To be able to work with unemployed, underemployed, and formerly incarcerated New Yorkers who are

really striving to find a new career path for themselves—many of them with almost unimaginable hardships thrown in their way—there’s nothing more rewarding than being a part of something like that,” Barron says. “Brooklyn Woods is an extraordinary organization and the kind of nonprofit that all should aspire to be.”

For Pamela Jennett, who graduated from Brooklyn Woods 10 years ago and has worked at Barronarts for nearly all that time, the training was a pathway to professional stability after what she calls a “varied and nontraditional” career before the program. Brooklyn Woods’ target population includes those facing long-term unemployment, Peltzer says. Two years ago, Jennett worked on the handcrafted wood panel that holds Michelle Obama’s White House portrait. “I was honored to be a part of that,” she says.

“[Brooklyn Woods] allows people to see that there are options,” she continues. “It allows people to survive and fend for themselves.”

ELEVATING THE CRAFT

Peltzer’s journey to Brooklyn Woods—and the change it’s brought to so many lives—began during his time at Haverford. A photography course with William Williams, the Audrey A. and John L. Dusseau Professor in the Humanities and a professor of fine arts, served as his first critical interaction with the arts. Peltzer went on to take several more classes with Williams, who helped him engage with making things “in a more intellectual, thoughtful, and creative way,” he says. The experience inspired him to pursue an MFA, and laid the groundwork for a career as a teacher.

In addition to his work with Brooklyn Woods, Peltzer has been a part-time assistant professor at the New School’s Parsons School of Design for 27 years, where he teaches model-making and woodworking. While he enjoys both vocations, he says, “Understanding college kids and the privileges they have does really drive me to stay with the population of Brooklyn Woods.”

When Peltzer decided to study art

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PELTZER SHOWS BROOKLYN WOODS graduate Gina Colon how to apply a white wash finish to a custom kitchen panel. Peltzer and graduates of Brooklyn Woods who are building kitchen cabinet doors for a supportive housing unit check the dimensions, BELOW LEFT; constructing picture frames is one of the basic projects that teaches students how to use a table saw, BELOW RIGHT.



history at Haverford, an adviser urged him to enter an upper-level seminar on William Morris, the 19th-century English designer, craftsman, and poet whose romantic notions about the meaning of labor and the importance of craft took root in Peltzer's mind. He was inspired by conversations in the class about the nobility of working with one's hands, and carried with him that sense of purpose as he embarked on his career. His time at Haverford was "a real awakening," he says.

"If you asked my family what my love language is they'd probably say acts of service, so in some ways, I was predisposed for this kind of work," Peltzer says, "but being at Haverford and drinking in the philosophy and culture of the place really solidified a lot of things for me. It really pointed me toward a career of service."

SPRINGBOARD TO SERVICE

The hundreds of people who have learned at his hand and used their training as a springboard to a new career demonstrate the results of that service. Although seven weeks is just "a heartbeat" compared with the years-long apprenticeships common in Europe, Peltzer says, his students walk away with all the fundamentals necessary to grow into their new trade.

Natasha Goodlow is one of many who have found stability following their time at Brooklyn Woods. Like Peltzer, she was interested in making things from a young age, and fell in love with woodworking in middle school. In a woodshop, she found herself fulfilled, working with her hands and putting in the effort to hone her craft. In her early 30s, she was working as a hotel engineer at a major chain in San Antonio when the pandemic hit. She was laid off, along with nearly all her colleagues, and forced to confront an uncertain professional future. She moved to New York City in November 2020 to live with her now-wife, in need of work. After a long stretch of unemployment and on the verge of a deep depression, she learned about Brooklyn Woods and eagerly applied.

Now, Goodlow is the foreperson at Elle Woodworking, which mills wood for commercial and residential artisans and was one of three companies to offer her full-time employment before she had even graduated. She's fallen in love with woodworking all over again, and is passionate enough that it feels more like play than work, she says.

Peltzer's character shines through just as much as his craft, Goodlow says. Between the training program

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and the social venture, he's a busy man. But he still shows up every day ready to make a difference.

"For them to provide this space to go, these people to talk to, these skills to hone, and then the job—my dream job—they change people's lives," Goodlow says. "I don't know if they truly realize what they do for people. I'm living proof that they change lives."

Although the training lasts just seven weeks (Pagan's cohort was an exception) and is designed to get students working for pay as soon as possible, Peltzer says his students tend to bond quickly. "It started to feel kind of like a family for me, and family's very important," Pagan says. "This program helped fill a gap for me." Coming into the shop every day felt something like therapy, he says, and in the end it instilled him with hope and confidence.

Brooklyn Woods' work—its ability to inspire that kind of change in students—is about much more than technical training. "It all starts with a culture of acceptance and respect," Peltzer says. Over the course of the program, that foundation builds camaraderie as each group of students takes on the personality of its individual members. By the end, "graduations here can be emotional," he says.

So, too, is the experience of seeing what his students go off to accomplish after completing the program—the sense of joy Peltzer feels when he walks into someone else's shop and sees several of his graduates working there, years later, and taking on positions of authority and responsibility.

"It's a great feeling to be able to see the progress and the changes that we've been able to make in people's lives," he says. "It's super rewarding and makes it all worthwhile."

Ben Seal is a freelance writer who covers psychedelics, environmental policy, and academic research.