

Young carpenter's a cut above the rest

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When William Butler has a plan, he follows it.

The 17-year-old Henrico County youth has spent more than half his life sharpening his carpentry skills, even when it has required him to work against the grain.

From his earliest days mimicking contractors with a plastic hammer to his recent return from a national cabinetry contest in Kansas City, Mo., Butler has always had a knack for construction.

For the Raleigh, N.C., native, the appeal of carpentry lies in the process of turning lumber into something functional.

“You basically go from a tree to a table — with several steps in between,” he said.

At 6 feet 4 inches tall, Butler shifts his large hands at right angles as he speaks, as if he's bringing blueprints to life.

He said his first memories of building involve Lego bricks, model trains and particleboard furniture. They were small. They were simple. But most important, they sparked a passion that has spanned more than a decade.

It wasn't until after his grandfather's death in 2005 that he had the opportunity to fully immerse himself in the craft.

Although he was 8 years old at the time, Butler wasn't able to work alongside the veteran carpenter.

“I never saw him in his shop or anything,” he said. “I saw what was in his shop after he passed away.”

With an arsenal of his grandfather's tools now at his fingertips, Butler had the means to broaden his interest.

After experimenting with his newly inherited band saw, scroll saw and drill press, he started becoming more confident in his abilities.

By the age of 14, it was apparent that he needed more room to work. Rather than moving his



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operation from the family garage into a carport or other pre-fabricated structure, Butler proposed building a shed.

His parents, who had minimal woodworking experience, were slow to warm to the idea.

“We weren’t real excited about building it, because we didn’t know what we were doing,” said his father, Steve Butler.

Steve and his wife, Gregg, put William in charge of the budget, planning and construction of the 192-square-foot shed.

“I’d seen all of it done before on TV and YouTube like ‘This Old House’ and whatnot, but never actually done it before,” Butler said. “I knew how to do it, I just hadn’t done it.”

The trio worked on the shed for eight months in 2011. During this period, a hurricane and earthquake tested the young carpenter’s construction project.

Butler said there was minimal damage, and the shed was completed in November.

By the time he enrolled at Highland Springs Technical Center, he was eager for his first taste of formal woodworking training. Here he delved into the finer points of carpentry.

In September 2013, Butler and a partner participated in a woodworking competition through the SkillsUSA program.

According to their website, SkillsUSA helps students become skilled members of the workforce. They sanction competitions across the United States ranging from barbering to masonry work.

The pair netted first place for their park bench construction, which followed the blueprints perfectly.

“It was a fun experience, and it kind of confirmed that I was on the right path,” he said.

But the judges weren’t the only ones taking notice of Butler’s prowess.

Haley Pearsall, the owner of Tuckahoe Wood Workers and chairman of the SkillsUSA cabinetmaking contest, said Butler is above average on his interest and his focus.

The two crossed paths when Butler was seeking cabinetmaking advice for the national competition in Kansas City. For close to five hours, Pearsall passed his knowledge of tools and construction onto Butler.

He placed 13th out of 39 high school competitors.

Upon returning home, Butler accepted an offer to work for Pearsall. He now helps out at the Tuckahoe Plantation as well as operating William’s Handcrafted — his own woodworking business.

“He has so much confidence,” Pearsall said. “I can tell he’s going to be successful in whatever he does.”