

My friend Bruce



A simple carpentry question built much more than a coffee table.

by Will Elliott

My friend Bruce is a 58-year-old recently retired building contractor from Southern California. I am a 24-year-old surfer, paramedic and dental school applicant from Duluth, Minnesota. Bruce has been a friend of my father's since before I was born. In July 2015, I rented a compact efficiency apartment from Bruce located exactly five properties to the east of his house, which also happens to be his childhood home.

Bruce was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis decades ago. Today he is legally blind, uses a power wheelchair, and has an exceptionally upbeat attitude. Bruce is a master carpenter and maintains a well-equipped wood shop in a tiny single-car garage attached to his house. The condensed space is divided between Bruce's well-used power tools and a variety of vintage but perfectly usable surfboards.

Bruce made his living in the construction business and built a reputation for being a hardworking, precise and honest journeyman carpenter and building contractor. As his MS progressed, he was forced to retire from fieldwork but remained a valuable project manager. He reported to work each day with the help of a personal driver and video magnifier to help with his vision while he managed the project estimating and public relation aspects of the business.

But Bruce's love in life, second only to his wife and two adult children, is surfing. While it has been more than 10 years since Bruce has caught a wave, his passion remains. He can quickly

recall surfing large waves off any number of his secret spots throughout Southern California and Northern Baja, Mexico. He is not your average surfer by any means: He successfully completed the arduous 32-mile Catalina Classic Paddleboard Race from Catalina Island to Manhattan Beach, California, on numerous occasions. And his collection of vintage surfboards reads like a fine novel in the progression of surfboard design from the 1970s to the late 1990s, all boards he used to catch waves over the years.

Lessons beyond woodworking

Shortly after moving in, I noticed Bruce's impressive tool collection and asked if I could repair a loose leg on a small coffee table located in my apartment.

I expected Bruce to point me in the direction of the wood glue and we'd be done. Boy, was I wrong. This small request has morphed into the development of a deep and profound friendship. Bruce has taught me that woodworking, like life, is about being patient, understanding that the process is often more important than the product, taking pride in doing things right, cleaning up my own mess, and that listening is a virtue without equal. He has also taught me the importance of thinking something through before taking action, or what he calls "measure twice—cut once," to make sure a piece of wood is the proper size.

My time with Bruce is valuable in more ways than just learning about woodworking or discussing our shared passion for surfing. He has this tremendously positive attitude, rapid-fire wit and a mischievous sparkle in his blue eyes. He has an innate ability to weave in a life lesson while teaching me about the different species of hard woods.

He talks about his experiences encouraging people to take pride in their work and once bragged that he got a group of inexperienced "weekend" carpenters to roof a friend's house in one day. While teaching me to laminate wood strips into a custom trout-fishing net, Bruce also explains that a high moral and ethical code is not only the most important business practice, but critical to success in any endeavor.

Bruce has breathing problems as a result of his MS, and it's sometimes difficult to hear him when he speaks. But that doesn't prevent him from explaining in great passionate detail the intricacies of woodworking. After a session with Bruce, working on either his project or mine, I often wonder how we transitioned from gluing mahogany blocks to discussing the birth of his daughter or a friend's funeral. I walk back to my little apartment smiling and thinking, "Well, Bruce has done it again." "Measure twice—cut once" means significantly more than saving material—he is telling me to make good decisions the first time.

Bruce's MS has certainly changed the course of his life. He no longer works in construction. He's physically unable to surf. But it's also allowed him to focus on what's truly important in a fulfilling life, and he has patiently shared these values with me. Bruce has redefined the concept of quality of life, and I am the beneficiary of his positive attitude, profound honesty and willingness to teach.

I will carry the lessons I am learning from my friend Bruce throughout my life. These gifts started with the simple question: “Bruce, can you help me fix a leg on a coffee table?”

Will Elliott, after completing his biology degree at the University of Minnesota Duluth, recently completed the paramedic program at the UCLA Center for Prehospital Care. He is applying for admittance to dental school.