As an artisan and woodworker, DCD woodworking teacher Gerry Clifford has always been drawn to the simplicity and beauty of Shaker furniture.

For a number of years, he has been visiting the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, both on his own and with students, to view the museum’s impressive collection of Shaker works and to gather information and ideas for his classes.

This spring, the museum invited him to select works handcrafted over the years in his middle school courses on Shaker Furniture, Low Back Chair, and Shaker Oval Box to be displayed alongside the museum’s notable collection of original Shaker works in the exhibit “Shaker Works Then and Now: Youthful Interpretations of the Shaker Form,” on display from February 22 through May 17, 2015.
Many visitors to the show couldn’t immediately tell the difference between the originals and the student work. “You can tell the real ones,” said Gerry, “but the student pieces really hold up. They blend nicely.”

The show also featured photographs of students working, showing the process of making the beautiful pieces on display. Process is a word that is bandied about these days in art circles, but Gerry says he prefers to use the word “stages” in discussing the completion of a work from beginning to end.

He asks his students to slow down, to approach the work methodically, to step back from it and think carefully about the next steps, redoing their work if necessary. Working on a project that may take months to complete is contrary to the breakneck speed of today’s technology-driven pursuits, but one that has value, he says, not just in the art studio but in many other areas of life as well.

“If students start a project with me, they’re going to finish,” he says. “I sense that kids are given the option to walk away from things. They want to stop something if it’s not coming out to their liking, if it’s not perfect. I try to get across to them the value of this slow, methodical approach. It’s a hard concept for kids to understand when they are living in a disposable world.”

The key to getting the professional-looking results of the pieces in the exhibit is this no-nonsense, streamlined approach that he says he discovered in the Japanese system of teaching art.

“Children have a most wonderful capacity that you can tap into if you don’t baby them or coddle them,” he says, “but instead remind them, ‘I think you could try this or give it more effort.’ Then something more wonderful can come out of it.”

Starting as early as first grade, he works on establishing this mindset, ramping up the project challenges each year to stretch his students’ skill sets and capacities.

“By the time they get to middle school,” he says, “they have a good working vocabulary of the medium. They know that slow, methodical approach and can take on some pretty substantial work.”

While it’s “pretty heady stuff,” as he says, it’s not perfect. He tells his students not to worry about perfection, but just to put in their best effort.

“I try to get them to buy into the premise that perfection can be boring. Part of my mission as a teacher is to share with my students the mystery, magic, and at times, whimsical nature of wood. There are wonderful qualities within wood to be seen and discovered. There is a certain beauty in the imperfection of a crack in a slab of walnut, especially if you know how to showcase it.”

In contrast, by studying a manufactured piece together in class, they come to appreciate the differences between it and something that is handmade. “There’s no hand, no human signature; it’s pressed out of a machine; it’s efficient, it works, the table holds stuff, but it doesn’t do anything for my soul, it doesn’t do anything for my head. I think they get it at a certain age. If they’re with me long enough, they get it.”

“I tell them, your piece will have your name on it, and it will sing who you are at this moment in your life, and that’s beautiful.”

— Leslie Bowen