

# KIP CHRISTENSEN:

## A Life Dedicated to Helping Others

*Photos courtesy of Kip Christensen unless otherwise noted.*

### Terry Martin

Looking back, it seems I had always been aware of Kip Christensen's quiet presence—a man who never pushed himself ahead of others but was ready to step up if needed. Most people who know Kip might think of him as a dedicated turner and turning teacher, and Kip confirms this impression when he talks about turning: "I'm a total woodturning nerd, and I always have to be making something. Also, I can't resist the sound of a chainsaw, and I have to go see what is being cut. I could never use up all the wood that I've got."

This impression is also confirmed when you watch Kip in action as a demonstrator. When I first saw him give a demonstration of basic technique at an AAW Symposium, I concluded it was the clearest demonstration I had ever seen. He was showing how the movements of turning can be broken down into three axes—lift, swing, and rotate—and he explained these movements in a very clear article that every beginner should read (see *Articles by Kip sidebar* at the end of this story.) It would be tempting to assume Kip's turning achievements are his main professional focus, but the truth is far more interesting than that.

### Family and community

It is not possible to separate Kip the teacher, the turner, and the person

from his community, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. Kip was born in 1955 in Banida, Idaho, a small farming community of around 100 people, most of whom were members of Kip's church. He explains how all of this has guided his life: "We lived on a small dairy farm, which I loved. We were a close-knit family with six children, and I was the third. I'm very thankful I was raised on a farm, because my parents taught me to enjoy work and to squeeze what I could get out of every day." It comes as a surprise to learn that the very careful Kip we now know was once a natural risk-taker: "When I was a teenager, for my mother the most worrisome things I did often involved something dangerous, like jumping fifty feet off a bridge into a river, or water skiing with a cast on my leg. The worst my mom could threaten me with was that she hoped someday I would have seven young boys just like myself."

Much of Kip's childhood sounds like a bygone era, a simpler life that many yearn for today. "My first three years of school were in a small three-room schoolhouse with one classroom where our teacher simultaneously taught around thirty students from grades one through six. We also had a library and a gym, but there was no indoor plumbing, and outside we had one water spigot and two outhouses."



### A maker in the making

"I started making things very early," says Kip. "When I was five, I used to rummage through the ash pile from the coal stove to find the pieces left over from used-up pencils. Then I would whittle willow saplings and press the lead into the pith to make new pencils. It was my own idea, and I suppose it was my first experience of manufacturing. I just had to be making things."

Kip's idyllic farm life ended when he was twelve years old and his family moved to Spokane, Washington, where his father started a cabinet factory, something that had a profound influence on the direction his life would take. "I

was not impressed that we had to leave Banida,” explains Kip, “but I soon learned to love the new life.” The family business started out with six employees that eventually grew to 175, and at the peak of production, they were making cabinets for over 2,000 homes a year. “From age 14 to 18, I worked in almost every area of the shop, part-time during school and full-time in the summers. It was my introduction to woodworking machinery, materials, and manufacturing principles. That was how I paid for my education, and while I was working on my bachelor’s and master’s degrees, I continued to design and sell kitchens for the company.”

Something that was noticeably missing was woodturning: “It might surprise people to learn that I never had any kind of shop or woodworking class during my junior high or high school years,” says Kip. “They had me figured for an academic track, and I really regret that they never introduced me to the wood and metal shops.”

### Education at BYU

By the time Kip went to Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah, he had not decided what he wanted to pursue as a career. “I was interested in making things, and I was also attracted by the idea of teaching, but my main interest was in qualifying as a teacher of religion.” However, Kip chose BYU’s Industrial Education program “because they had woodworking classes,” and that choice changed his life: “I took the first woodworking class I had ever taken, and that was the end of any other plans. I had found my passion, and there was no looking back.”

It was also at BYU that Kip first tried turning: “I put a piece of green cherry wood on the lathe to make a

lamp base for my wife. I had no clue about what I was doing, but the shavings were coming off, I was creating shapes, and it smelled so good. And the thought came to me: ‘This is going to be significant in my life.’ Since then, if I count my production items, I guess I’ve turned about 60,000 pieces, and I have sold many, but I’ve never turned for a living.”

In 1976, Kip met Dale Nish, who was a professor in the Industrial Education program. “He took me under his wing as my unofficial but very engaged mentor,” Kip recalls, “and I will always be thankful for that. Dale had me work as a teaching assistant, and I saw how he found ways to give students opportunities that went way beyond the classroom. That’s something I tried to carry on in my own teaching. He used to invite people up to his house to socialize, and while everyone else was talking, I’d spend hours looking at his collection of turnings. So while I was teaching, I used to invite students to my home for a barbeque and they’d see my collection of turned pieces.” See Kip’s profile of Dale Nish, “We Don’t Collect Woodturnings, We Collect Friends,” in the Summer 2004 *American Woodturner* (vol 19, no 2, page 18).

Kip’s thesis for his master’s degree was *Improving the Working Properties*

*of Spalted Wood Through Impregnation with Methyl Methacrylate*. He explains, “Mel and Mark Lindquist had been pioneering the turning of spalted wood, so Dale suggested I could do my thesis on that. Dale asked Mel to send us some roughed-out bowls to stabilize.” Mark Lindquist remembers cutting the blanks and Mel roughing them out before they sent them to Dale and Kip. “When they came back after being treated,” writes Mark, “I rigged up a dust extraction unit with a special filter to keep the dust from filling the shop, particularly since we used abrasive power-sanding to finish shaping the pieces.” Kip says his study was the first on record involving the stabilization of spalted wood.

### Starting a career

After Kip finished his master’s degree, he taught as a lecturer from 1982 to 1984 at Humboldt State University in California. For Kip, it was a very different experience from life at BYU: “Humboldt State is in the heart of the redwoods,” says Kip, “and back then it was the hippy center of the USA. I was probably the only guy on campus who didn’t have long hair and a beard, and I looked like I was a teenager, but I had two great years there. After that, I worked with my father again until 1988, when a position came up at BYU. I ▶



Kip demonstrating to participants of the AAW youth hands-on workshop, Raleigh, North Carolina, 2019.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



Kip offers helpful guidance in one of many valuable teaching moments.



Kip discussing bowl design in a beginning woodworking class at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 2013. He encourages students to cut out paper templates to try on the wood blank.



"Turning curly fries with my granddaughter Becca." Kaneohe, Hawai'i, 2020.

returned to teach there for thirty-two years, until 2020."

### The Utah Symposium

The longest running woodturning symposium in the world was the Utah Woodturning Symposium. It was started by Dale Nish, and the first

event was in 1979. Dale continued to organize the event for nineteen years, with Kip often acting as his reliable assistant. When Dale stepped down, Kip took over and directed the event for nine years. Over the last eleven years, there were three different directors: Mike Mahoney, Susan Hendricks, and Jay and Vernita Brown. During those eleven years, Kip was on the event's Board of Directors, and he focused on promoting turning for young people by coordinating the Youth Scholarship and the Youth Workshop.

Kip's early involvement with the Utah Symposium had a deep influence on his development as a turner: "For nearly four decades, I became friends with so many of the world's top turners that it's hard to remember them all now. I remember in one of Del Stubbs' demonstrations, he described his "ten principles of clean cutting." I was so impressed that over the years I developed my own list of principles and wrote an article about it for *American Woodturner*."

Many of us remember those early photos of David Ellsworth turning while seated astride his lathe, so when David came to the Utah Symposium, Kip was interested to see what would happen. "That's exactly what he did!" says Kip. "I was so interested to try, and he let me use his tools while he was at lunch. I still have the little hollow vessel I made."

One of the turners who most influenced Kip was Richard Raffan. When Kip was a student, Dale Nish invited Richard to give a demonstration for his class: "Richard had a pedestal grinder next to the lathe so he could easily take a quarter-turn to sharpen his tool. As soon as it lost even a bit of its edge, he would turn and sharpen it freehand, and he never turned the grinder off! It only took a couple of seconds, and he was back on the lathe. It was a tremendous lesson in efficiency."

Richard remembers Kip very well from the beginnings of the Symposium and later as its director: "You don't get drama around people who are well organized, and Kip is a particularly good planner. During my early years as a regular presenter, I knew Kip as a reliable part of the small team that ensured everything was in place. He was always floating around, sorting out situations before they became problems, and if he found demanding presenters irritating or frustrating, he didn't show it. I'm sure



*Inlaid Box*, 2004,  
Boxelder burl, spalted  
boxelder burl, ebony,  
3" x 4½" (8cm x 11cm)



if Kip has a motto it's, 'If you do it right, you do it once, and it lasts.'"

Bonnie Klein, who demonstrated at the Utah Symposium for over thirty years, has enormous respect for Kip: "I have known Kip for a very long time. My first Symposium was about 1981 and I attended them for over thirty years. I have watched Kip demonstrating many times and what always impresses me most is his attention to detail and his striving for perfection. His pieces are perfect!"

Kip says one of his most memorable achievements was organizing the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary Symposium in 2004. There were thirty-four presenters from twelve countries, and more than 700 attendees who were able to choose from 130 presentations: "It was roughly like doing three regular symposiums, but I'm so glad that we did it. The list of presenters was a "who's who" of woodturning at the time. We also produced a book and had a significant exhibition at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art, which I helped curate." Mike Mahoney, who took over organizing the Symposium after Kip stepped down, knows better than most what Kip put into it. "Running the Utah

Symposium was a labor of love," says Mike, "and Kip is one of the fairest and most thoughtful people you will ever meet."

### Family

I was fortunate enough to have been invited by Kip to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary Utah Symposium as a demonstrator. I remain grateful that he gave me the chance to take part in that landmark event, and it also changed my impression of Kip because I saw how his relentless energy was tempered by gentle calm that settled the nerves of everyone around him. But one of my strongest impressions of Kip, and his family, came from meeting Preston, one of Kip's five children. Kip had arranged for Preston to be my assistant. Although he was still in his teens, he impressed me with his quick intelligence, helpfulness, and calm demeanor. Truly, the seed doesn't fall far from the tree.

Preston recently offered me some insights into his father's life that are deeper than any outsider could ever know: "Many teachers find it easier to be patient when teaching other youth than their own children, but I never felt this way with my dad. He was incredibly patient with me, even

when I went through the bottom of a bowl he had roughed out twenty years earlier and had told me he 'preferred' I didn't turn until I had a little more practice turning bowls." Kip's patience with his son paid off, as he proudly told me, "Preston has really become an accomplished turner, with pieces in juried exhibitions and published in books."

Because Preston also took his father's woodworking classes, he has further insight into Kip's professional life: "Dad doesn't get settled into ruts. Many professors get a class to a 'good enough' level, and once they hit tenure, they don't change it much. I took my dad's woodworking classes about halfway through his time as a professor and it seemed every year after that he would mention some change, usually minor, that he was going to make to the class to make it a better learning experience for the students."

Kip is eternally grateful to his wife Kim for her support and how she opened their home to his students. She recalls how often they came for barbeques and what she calls all-you-can-eat activities. "Kip often required them to design and turn ▶



*Antler Box, 2008, Elk antler, African blackwood, turquoise, 2½" × 3½" (6cm × 9cm)*

Kip pioneered the creative use of antler material in turning.



an ice cream scoop,” she says, “and then they’d test it by scooping hard ice cream into a cone. Also, on the final day of class, Kip had a tradition of teaching the students how to turn a potato on the lathe to make curly fries. The shavings were quickly cooked and eaten.”

Preston told me that his parents’ role in helping students is reflected in an endowed Kip and Kim Christensen Scholarship at BYU. “It’s funded by generous donations of many people, including my parents,” he says. “The scholarship has been used to assist students in several ways, including helping them afford nicer materials for woodworking projects, trips to student woodworking competitions and conferences, and even for buying lathes, woodturning tools, and accessories for the campus.”

### Teaching and mentoring

It will come as a surprise to many that Kip never taught regular woodturning classes at BYU, but he did conduct some turning

classes in the evenings for students who wanted that: “I mentored them on the side while I was teaching my regular classes in woodworking, furniture design, and manufacturing using metals, plastics, and wood.”

This mentoring of young turners and educating others also has had a major impact outside of Kip’s professional life: “All of the books and all of the videos that I have done have been about that, and most of the workshops I teach are for beginners. I’ve done a lot of promoting turning in public schools in Utah, and I’m happy to say there is still a lot of turning being done in those schools as part of more general manufacturing classes. Even a small project like turning a pen gives a student experience in using a bandsaw, a drill press, a sander, and a lathe. It’s challenging but so rewarding when you see the light go on.”

Kip is very proud that during the twelve years he taught furniture design, many of his students got

national recognition in competitions and publications: “That was the most satisfying thing for me, and it was an experience the students would remember for the rest of their lives.”

Kip’s students fondly recall their years under his guidance. One former student, Amy Costello, describes her time at BYU: “One of the most important things about Kip was just how welcoming he was and what a natural drive for community-building he has. He always encouraged me to engage with the woodturning community and found opportunities for me to show my own work and teach what I know. It’s pretty intimidating to come into the field as a young person, but Kip did an excellent job of making me feel like I belonged.”

Another of his former students, Mitchell Ogden, agrees that Kip is an outstanding mentor: “Kip has a calm, straightforward approach. He has two most prominent facial expressions: the serious



(Left) *Tower Box*, 2009, Amboyna burl, African blackwood, turquoise, 7" x 3" (18cm x 8cm)

“Detail is something you don’t see if you’re standing a few feet away.”

(Right) *Whited Sepulcher Vessel*, 2015, Russian olive burl, 6" x 8" (15cm x 20cm)

Kip made *Whited Sepulcher Vessel* in a robust departure from the precision more typical in his turning.



Kip figures he has turned more than 50,000 items for sale or as gifts. An intuitive level of skill develops with that amount of experience, which Kip has shared freely over the course of his teaching career.

*this-is-how-it's done* mode, and the *twinkle-in-his-eye* look that he wore most of the time.” Mitchell was mightily impressed with Kip’s turning ability: “I remember the first time I watched him turn. As a very young “professional,” I had made a few turned pieces, but I was mainly scraping. Kip proceeded to cut a bead with a skew. It was quick and clean, needed very little sanding, and my mind was blown because I had no idea it was even possible. It was then that I knew he was the real deal, especially because he does it all with a sense of humility that makes him very approachable.”

Kip is an extraordinary ambassador for woodturning and has given more than 300 presentations at different workshops and symposia. He has also been instrumental in the development of turning in the AAW. Linda Ferber, a long-time staff member recently retired from the AAW, says she can’t speak too highly of Kip. “He has a passion for sharing knowledge and skills,” she says. “Kip has been pivotal in providing education and

support for future woodturners. He developed lesson plans for youth and beginners, and his hands-on programs for our Symposia have been amazing. Kip is developing a pilot program for woodturning with Skills USA, so I believe the future is brighter because of Kip’s guidance.”

### Kip’s own work

In his own turning, Kip tries to focus on form and detail in design: “I think form is the most important thing,” he says. “I see so many pieces that are great in every aspect except form. Also, detail is something you don’t see if you’re standing a few feet away—you have to have the piece in your hand. I’ll put chatter work inside boxes or underneath lids, or put small pieces of turquoise inside a box or some very small beads that you can’t see until you are very close. That’s my style, what I do naturally. Kevin Wallace wrote that my work is aesthetically pure and technically precise, and I was pleased about that because that’s what I hope people will notice.”

## ARTICLES BY KIP

### EXPLORE!

Writing and publishing has been an important part of Kip’s involvement in woodturning. Many of his articles are must-reads for beginners. Find his articles in both *American Woodturner* and *Woodturning Fundamentals*. Log on at [woodturner.org](http://woodturner.org) and use the Explore! search tool.

- “Ten Principles of Clean Cutting,” *AW* February 2016 (vol 31, no 1, page 14)
- “Build Your Skills and Train Your Eye by Turning a Sphere,” *AW* August 2016 (vol 31, no 4, page 20)
- “The Scales and Chords of Spindle Turning,” *AW* February 2017 (vol 32, no 1, page 14)



## In praise of teachers

In a turning world where the accolades often go to those who push themselves forward, dedicated woodturning teachers are not given the status they deserve. Kip Christensen has contributed more than most, but he always felt that seeing his students succeed is the best reward he can receive. His legacy will survive as they, in turn, hand on all that they have learned to new students. So this story is written both as a tribute to a remarkable teacher and in praise of all those teachers who help new turners discover the wonderful world of woodturning. ■

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