

**‘Round the Mountain draws attention
to varied artisans throughout Southwest Virginia**

ABINGDON, Va. – December 12, 2007 - Some are at the stage in life where they can enjoy their crafts and artwork full time after a career as a teacher, banker, pharmacist or a factory worker. Many are natives of Southwest Virginia; others returned to their homes after years away, and some came to the region from elsewhere and never left.

‘Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network is a growing group of more than 200 artisans, farmers and other craft-related venues that is increasing awareness of the varied creative resources found in a 19-county region of southwestern Virginia.

One of the most visible benefits for members is an internet presence, said Diana Blackburn, executive director of ‘Round the Mountain. “Being a member means different things to each artisan. Some need help in spreading the word about their crafts and their wares, and many enjoy the networking and the opportunities to showcase this region of the state.”

For \$20-\$40 a year, artisans, agritourism ventures, galleries, studios and other craft-related venues can join ‘Round the Mountain and be listed on a comprehensive web-based craft directory on the organization’s website www.roundthemountain.org. But their reasons for hooking up with this growing organization are almost as varied as their crafts.

‘Better than sliced bread’

Brooklyn native Bill Dotten discovered Southwest Virginia while a student in Richmond and came to the area to hunt. He’s lived here for more than 35 years, retiring eight months ago from his life as a pharmacist in Coeburn in Wise County. Now he gets to spend his days woodturning, making bowls, vases and sculptures in his workshop studio he built at his home.

“I’ve been with ‘Round the Mountain since the beginning, and I think it’s better than sliced bread,” said Dotten. He’s on the RTM steering committee and he’s a teacher and lecturer on the art of woodturning, “which means we use a lathe,” and president of the American Association of Woodturners, a group with more than 65 members who meet in nearby Tennessee’s tri-cities area.

Dotten is also heavily involved in promoting an RTM venue, the Lays Building in Coeburn. It’s a renovated hardware store, built in 1915 and owned by the town of Coeburn. “We have molds and kilns and classes in stained glass, quilt-making, beading, wood work and woodturning. We’re envisioning a crafts school.” This historical building serves as a music venue, artisan training production and as a retail sales venue for a variety of craft items ranging from clay and glass to paper.

Outside the box and in the studio full time

A fellow artisan describes him as “the only artist I know around here that thinks so outside the box.” That’s Rick Radman, who after more than 30 years as a consultant and school teacher, gets to work exclusively on his “welded creatures” in his rural Wythe County Stony Fork Workshop.

“I got tired of doing just pottery so I took some welding classes. There are a lot of potters, but not a lot of recycled steel made into unusual birds,” said Radman.

His work features birds and other creatures welded together from recycled tools and other farm parts, wind chimes made from used coffee pots, roller skates, horseshoes and more. His work also includes high-fired, wheelthrown, functional pottery and hiking sticks made from homegrown bamboo.

“I think ‘Round the Mountain is a good thing. I don’t have a reliable computer, so anything about my work that’s on the Internet is great for me,” said Radman.

A basket in the White House

When friends were looking for a gift to the White House to represent the region, they immediately thought of Lee County basket maker Gary Carroll’s creations. A native of Southwest Virginia, Carroll learned the craft from a cousin and took nearly two years to learn the intricacies of basket making and caning before he was comfortable demonstrating and showing his handiwork from his business, Sugar Run Baskets.

“I think what makes my work different is that I cut the trees, use old tools and make everything by hand,” said Carroll. “And ‘Round the Mountain has helped tremendously in getting the word out about my work as well as many others in Southwest Virginia.”

One of his baskets reached the White House and others are on display and for sale in another RTM venue, such as Handsome Molly’s in Marion, and in a gallery in Knoxville.

Preserving her roots

Quilter Pat Houck lived away from her native Lee County for many years in northern Virginia and Michigan, but she finally got to return to her roots, and she’s lending a big hand in preserving, not only her craft, but the traditions, heritage and culture of the region.

A founding board member of ‘Round the Mountain, she says the organization changed her life. “The exposure for the artisans is wonderful and there couldn’t be a more dedicated group than those volunteers involved in this organization. They are totally committed to the artisans.”

Houck is also president of the Wilderness Road Arts & Crafts Guild and a founding member of the Wilderness Road Dulcimer Club. Her banker husband, Allen, who is a woodworker, is also a member of the artisan network.

“For me to be able volunteer and to do something to bring emphasis to our area is great. North Carolina and Kentucky have been leaders in drawing emphasis to the traditional crafts, and so many talents in our area haven’t been showcased. It’s important that we take an interest and ensure that handmade is preserved.”

Pottery with a face

A stint at being laid off from his factory job led Roy Stoffel of Patrick County to join his wife in some pottery classes. Now he’s retired and makes his signature, hand-built clay sculptures full time at Windy Hill Pottery in Stuart. He says his hillbilly face jugs are the only ones made with hats.

He heard about ‘Round the Mountain from his pottery classes at Patrick Henry Community College and said joining and having his work featured on the website “is important because I don’t even have a computer!”

“I think ‘Round the Mountain is a good idea, and we need to find out who the artisans are in our area and stick together.”

For those who haven’t found markets

New York native Ellen Shankin of Floyd “joined hands” with seven fellow potters in 1998 and created the Floyd County artisan group known as 16 Hands.

“Joining together in this group and creating annual studio tours was a wonderful experience and important to our careers,” said Shankin. “The many components of ‘Round the Mountain are important to those artisans trying to make crafts a more viable way of life and for many who may not have found markets yet.”

Shankin, who co-chairs the craft coordinating committee of RTM, has been living and working in Floyd County for more than 30 years. She’s an established artisan who’s looking forward to the opportunity to exhibit at the artisan center planned for Abingdon.

A Mason jar of flowers

Dickenson County native Dwight Overturf and his wife Rhonda are operating Pleasant Hill Farm in Wythe County and seeing benefits from the exposure that ‘Round the Mountain is bringing to their agritourism business.

“Through ‘Round the Mountain we are exposed to others who have similar problems and situations in their business trying to get the word out,” said Overturf.

Pleasant Hill Farm is acres of flowers and visitors are given a wide-mouth Mason jar and a cutting tool and are free to “fill it up with as many flowers as you can get in there.”

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About ‘Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network: `Round the Mountain was created in 2004, as a result of funding from Governor Mark Warner's Virginia Works Initiative. Recognizing the assets of the 19-county region, Governor Warner announced \$100,000 in Appalachian Regional Commission funds to develop an artisan initiative in southwest Virginia to further develop the region as a major cultural and heritage tourism destination. A group of interested individuals representing state and local government, planning districts, the small business community, arts organizations, economic development, tourism and artisans began the planning process; the organization is operated by a board of directors. Other funding partners include Virginia Department of Community and Housing Development, the Virginia Tobacco Indemnification and Community Revitalization Commission, Virginia Commission for the Arts and Virginia Tourism Corporation.

The ‘Round the Mountain service area includes Bland, Buchanan, Carroll, Dickenson, Floyd, Franklin, Giles, Grayson, Lee, Montgomery, Patrick, Pulaski, Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, Wise, and Wythe counties, and the cities of Bristol, Galax, Norton and Radford.

Contact:

Diana Blackburn, Executive Director
`Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network
851 French Moore Jr. Boulevard – Suite 145
Abingdon, VA 24210
Phone: 276.492.2080
Fax: 276.698.3070
email: dblackburn@roundthemountain.org

www.roundthemountain.org