

# LANCASTER NEW ERA

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**Historic Restorations, Lancaster, aims to preserve the traditional building craft by educating ordinary homeowners. "The real bottom line with us is we think the craft is dying," says Chuck Groshong (left), who recently taught a class on wood-rot repair.**



## Stuck on the past

*Historic Restorations educates owners of old houses with hands-on classes*

*A man who works with his hands is a laborer; a man who works with his hands and brain is a craftsman; but a man who works with his hands and his brain and his heart is an artist.*

— Louis Nizer, American lawyer (1902-1994)

Chuck Groshong is an artist who fears his art is dying.

He takes a traditional approach to building, sticking with mortise and tenon in a particle-board world.

Chuck runs Lancaster-based Historic Restorations with his wife Lois, their daughter Danielle Groshong-Keperling and her husband Jonathan Keperling.

From solid-wood custom cabinetry to additions that complement an older home's original style, the family sees restoration as not just a job but an art.

"The real bottom line with us is we think the (traditional building) craft is dying," Chuck says.

Look in the Yellow Pages, and you'll find dozens of drywallers.

But plastering is a far lonelier enterprise.

Historic Restorations hopes to keep traditional building alive by doing quality work — and educating ordinary homeowners.

The company recently launched classes to show homeowners historically sensitive approaches to everything from caring for wood floors to building picture frames.

In the long run, students might even save some money.

Using hand tools and often salvaged wood, Historic Restorations has converted a Honey Brook bank barn into a home and rebuilt a Victorian porch at Strasburg's Iron Horse Inn.

"We're kinda eclectic people," Chuck says. "We try to do a lot of things."

Those things include fighting trends toward less-expensive, less-durable building materials.

Historic Restorations' detail-oriented work isn't cheap. Building windows from scratch, for example, might cost three times more.

"But ours last 150 years," Jonathan points out.

Pricy or not, plenty of people see the appeal. Last year Historic Restorations grossed \$2 mil-



**Lisa Stephon tries her hand at window repair during a Historic Restorations how-to class.**

### FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Historic Restorations holds classes at 314 E. Liberty St., Building No. 2, Lancaster.

Upcoming topics include Wood Floor Care and Refinishing, May 10; Plaster Repair, June 14 and 15; Wood Window Sash Repair, June 21 and 22; and Introduction to Hand Tools, June 28 and 29.

Tuition ranges from \$110 to \$325.

For details, call 291-4688 or visit [historic-restorations.com](http://historic-restorations.com).

lion, roughly four times more than the previous year.

"We're not putting people down by any means," Chuck says of more modern builders. "We just choose another way."

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Chuck spent time underground as a miner before sampling the building field from virtually every angle.

He worked as a framer, mason, roofer, carpenter and cabinet-maker, then settled on tra-

ditional building.

Lois, who chairs the Lancaster City Historic Commission, also acts in commercials and on stage. She and Danielle, a former cake decorator, run the behind-the-scenes part of the family business.

"We do most of the office work," Danielle says. "Then if we need to, we go wax a floor."

Danielle and Jonathan met as Lancaster Catholic High School students, when both worked at a local pizza shop.

Jonathan started shoveling stone for Chuck in 1997. Since then, Jonathan says, his father-in-law has taught him everything he knows about the trades.

"That's his handicap," Chuck jokes.

Chuck, Jonathan and an apprentice carpenter work on jobs ranging from a 1725 house in New Jersey to a tiny 1809 church in Havre de Grace, Md.

It's hard, dirty work. But together the family has built a business that fills a unique, ever-shrinking niche.

"We're not competitive with the mainstream (builders)," Chuck says. "There's enough work out there for everybody."

Historic Restorations eventually hopes to have several crews working on different jobs at the same time.

But for now it's just the four of them.

What's their secret to a friction-free family enterprise?

"We go to a shrink every couple months to work out our problems," Chuck says.

Yes, he's quite serious.

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Chuck has used mahogany in Lancaster County jobs for 15 years.

He says he's never been called back to replace any of it.

Homeowners often choose more modern materials because they're less expensive and low-maintenance.

But once people get used to the higher price tag, most find the idea of traditional building exciting, Chuck says.

Historic Restorations began developing homeowner classes about a year ago. Chuck held the first class, on wood rot repair, earlier this month.

This fall, he and Danielle will teach classes on preservation, building dating and energy efficiency at Harrisburg Area Community College's Lancaster campus.

The current small-group classes — upcom-



ing topics range from to hand tools to plaster repair — are hands-on and target all skill levels.

Historic Restorations welcomes ideas for future topics. Chuck hopes to recruit like-minded craftspeople to share ideas and teach classes.

With the sluggish economy, the Groshong/Keperlings figured more homeowners might be interested in learning how to tackle home-improvement tasks themselves.

And from a marketing standpoint, they realize that students might eventually become clients.

"I don't think we'll ever get wealthy doing this," Chuck says. "But we can ... at least say we did educate."

Student Russell Eaton, who lives in an older home outside Mount Joy, learned to make thresholds in a one-on-one class with Chuck.

Making the thresholds himself saved Eaton money. He borrowed Chuck's expertise — and his professional-grade table saw.

"I'm curious about learning to do a lot of things," Eaton says.

"The more things you know, the more you can do yourself."