



Strokes & Plugs

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Second chances

By KAREN GARCIA

Having a midlife crisis at the age of 50 can mean buying a red sports car, but Sean O'Brien bought a lumber mill instead.

He runs **Pacific Coast Lumber**, a mill that specializes in taking local dying trees and creating indoor and outdoor furniture pieces with them. The practice is called urban-forested lumber—rather than burning the wood or leaving it to decay in a landfill, the wood is repurposed. O'Brien said that using the wood reduces the carbon footprint caused by transporting trees to a landfill or burning the wood.

"It's really a recycling effort to take this material and give it another life," he said.

There are many types of trees that grow throughout San Luis Obispo County, and you can find them all at the mill. O'Brien said the most abundant species he sees are cypress and ponderosa pine. With these trees, the mill specializes in creating cabins, sheds, and mantelpieces.

"The benefit of the type of material we use is it's more durable. For instance, if we make a table out of a large redwood slab, that table will be around for a hundred years or so," he said.

O'Brien said he especially loves working with all the locals in the county and telling them about the process of creating pieces that will last a lifetime.

"I really enjoy connecting with people at that level, and being able to provide them with a local resource is wonderful," he said.

O'Brien said there was a couple in Cambria who heard about the mill and was interested in making something with two trees scheduled to be removed from their backyard. These trees had sentimental value to the couple because their now-adult children had played on them throughout their childhood. O'Brien suggested making wood flooring to put in their home as way for the couple to preserve the trees.

"The kids will inherit the house, and the memories will still be there," he said.

O'Brien has his wife to thank for the second chance at a career choice. At the age of 49, Dana O'Brien was tired of her desk job, in the San Luis Obispo County assessor's office. She wanted to call her own shots, so she created A Place to Grow.



CRAFT

Switching gears from a software engineer to running a lumber mill, Sean O'Brien is content working in conjunction with his local community.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PACIFIC COAST LUMBER

Dana was in the business of using reclaimed materials such as windows, doors, and construction metal waste to create backyard structures such as greenhouses and studio sheds. Just a couple of hundred yards away from her business was Don Seawater, the former owner of Pacific Coast Lumber, who would provide materials to Dana from time to time.

Ready to retire, Seawater was looking for the next owner to run the mill. After working with A Place to Grow for three years, Seawater knew that the O'Briens would be the perfect fit to run his business, so O'Brien took over.

O'Brien continues to work with A Place to Grow; they provide each other with materials and creative suggestions. Working alongside his wife is something that O'Brien had always wanted to do.

"It's a dream come true and something I've talked to her about for years. We're close but not too close," O'Brien said.

Both businesses collaboratively work to give back to the youngest in the community through supporting children's organizations. He said that the mill donates sawdust to schools for worm farms or composting. The extra tree stumps are also donated to local schools to be used as seats; in this way, the mill is sponsoring outdoor classrooms.

O'Brien said he just wants to get the word out about his business as it really provides all types of material and products for his customers.

"We provide the soup-to-nuts materials. We can sell you raw materials and build things with them or we can finish them," he said.

To find out more about the unique materials and products that Pacific Coast Lumber can create visit pacificcoastlumber.com.