



# A Veteran Woodturner

Joshua Friend

**G**ualberto “Gil” Malave, a disabled Marine Corp veteran who served in the Vietnam War, stays positive and active in spite of chronic post-traumatic stress, the challenge of his life. His two passions, woodturning and Tai Chi Chuan, give him focus and provide connections and grounding. He teaches and practices both. His mission is to make himself accessible, as an example and a guide, to other struggling veterans and civilians. His message: With an open mind, there are always possibilities for recovery, balance, and meaning.

Tai Chi Chuan is an ancient Chinese martial art that combines body movement with meditation, utilizing continuous circular motion. Just as an off-kilter mass of wood is balanced and made to run true on the lathe, Gil practices Tai Chi to align himself with a sense of peace—physically and emotionally. “The body standing straight up with legs together is not stable. You could easily push me over,” he explains. “But if you put the legs out like a triangle with a broad base, you become rooted. From this position, with the tool held as

part of you with the handle at your hip, you can rotate and use your whole body to cut the wood easily and safely.”

## **Physically active**

Gil’s approach to lathe work incorporates a physical awareness that is enhanced by practicing Tai Chi Chuan. “It is about being in the moment, mentally and physically,” says the 59-year-old turner. Demonstrating his solid stance at the lathe, he comments, “This makes lathe work safer for one thing, but also, once the basics have been

mastered, makes way for creativity.” And by practicing Tai Chi regularly, Gil has learned that staying physically active is key to dealing with mental and emotional issues. He explains, “If you don’t feel good about your clothes, you go change your clothes—you can do something about it. And similarly, if you don’t feel good about your mental or emotional state, you can change that by changing your physical state.”

Just last year, Gil took up windsurfing, a move that typifies his active approach to life. Although he has had a hip replacement and no longer runs, he continues to ride his bicycle. He goes offshore fishing and restores older cars—currently a 1980 MGB. He also rides a motorcycle as a proud member of Rolling Thunder, a veterans’ group whose mission it is to publicize ongoing POW/MIA issues and to help American veterans from all wars. Gil has an absolutely contagious energy for learning new things and staying engaged in life, which have been crucial ingredients in his post-war therapy. “What is the altitude of your attitude?” he asks with a smile.

### A teacher and a student

Gil says that when he was young he was not a good student, but now he never wants to stop learning and has become an effective teacher. The Veterans Administration helped Gil get his start in woodturning in 2003 by paying for a semester at Buck’s County Community College in Newtown, PA, where he took his first course with Mark Sfirri. Sfirri opened up the doors to woodturning for Gil, not only teaching him the basics but also taking him on field trips to museums and exposing him to many different aspects of the craft. Sfirri recalls, “Woodturning was in the right

place at the right time for Gil, who had paid his dues dearly [in the war]. As a woodturning student, he embraced all of it, so much so that the craft became an opportunity for him to reinvent himself. It was really a rebirth for him.”

Since that enthusiastic beginning, Gil has gone on to become the president of his woodturning club, the New Jersey Woodturners, which meets in Roseland, NJ. He exhibits his work frequently and has won several awards for his woodturning—most recently a gold medal at the 2011 National Veterans Creative Arts Festival in Fayetteville, AR.

The VA also bought a lathe for Gil to help him get started, for which he remains extremely grateful—so much so that now when he talks about where he has come from and his ongoing recovery from post-traumatic stress, it is obvious that his love of teaching is a way for him to give back and continue healing. To this end, his shop in Raritan, NJ, is well equipped for woodturning instruction. With five different-style lathes, he uses each for teaching various aspects of turning. For example, his Stubby is uniquely appropriate for larger faceplate turning, with its short bed providing superior access. His General midi lathe works well for smaller spindle work, and the Oneway 2436, with extended bed for longer, larger spindle work and faceplate work on the outboard side is ideal for large turnings. Generally, Gil likes to teach two students at a time so that

he can provide ample attention to each, moving back and forth between them as needed. Gil is available and accessible to anyone who wants to learn woodturning, but he hopes to formalize his teaching and open a woodturning school. To accomplish this, he is working on finding financial grants and broader exposure.

Gil Malave’s love of the craft is contagious; his skill, obvious. And his gratitude-based love of teaching is absolutely heart-warming. Those qualities are as effective as any tool. For more information about Gil, visit his website at [studios202south.com](http://studios202south.com). ■

*Joshua Friend, a woodturner and writer, is a member of the Nutmeg Woodturner’s League, an AAW chapter that meets in Brookfield, CT. See [jfriendwoodworks.com](http://jfriendwoodworks.com) for examples of his work and contact information.*



Untitled, 2009, Ambrosia maple,  
7" x 7" (18 cm x 18 cm)



Untitled, 2009, Quilted maple,  
14" x 7" (36 cm x 18 cm)