

Jack Tennison builds furniture and much more

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AQUILLA—Jack Tennison has built more than 6,000 pieces of furniture for ministries from Texas to Canada to Cuba, but at age 92 he's now lost count. Still, he and others working with him keep building.

The furniture, however, is not the subject Tennison repeatedly returns to in conversation about the work. His main concern is helping others get involved in some type of ministry.



In Texans on Mission's furniture ministry, Jack Tennison has seen something amazing happen time and again. "People have done woodworking they have never dreamed they would do," he said. (Photo by

“I believe that every person on this earth is called by God and has a job to fill,” Tennison said. He wants to help people “get on the tracks” to do whatever God calls them to do, whether or not it’s woodworking.

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“The journey that Kathryn and I have been on is a unique and fabulous story,” Tennison said, referring to his wife of 73 years.

They both grew up in Oklahoma, married in 1951 after high school graduation, moved to Borger in the Texas Panhandle for Jack to work at a Phillips Petroleum gasoline plant, then shifted professional gears when they both went to college.

Afterwards, Tennison became a college math professor—first at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State) in San Marcos and then Texas Lutheran University in Seguin, where he led the math department, and Kathryn taught in middle school. They also attended First Baptist Church of Seguin.

‘God was calling me to be a volunteer’

Things began to change in 1993 when longtime friend Toby Druin suggested Tennison go with him to build a church in Laredo. Druin was associate editor of the *Baptist Standard*, news journal of the Texas Baptists, and later became the newspaper’s editor.

“Toby and I were sitting side by side in the rafters, in the trusses” of the Laredo church, Tennison recalled. “And I told him God was calling me to be a volunteer. ... I wasn’t sure exactly what, but I knew that I should be a volunteer.”

Druin remembers that day in Laredo. In the midst of 104-degree heat, while “waiting on another truss to be hoisted up,” Druin remembered Tennison saying he “wanted to do this all the time.” He didn’t mean hanging trusses in terrible heat. He meant ministry, Druin said.

The ministry they worked with in Laredo did only one project each year, Druin said. Tennison wanted to do more. So, the newspaper editor and longtime friend pointed him to Texas Baptist Men, which is now Texans on Mission.

Tennison said he “went home and told my [college] president I would be retiring,” which he did in December 1994.

After another building trip to the Rio Grande Valley, Tennison signed up with TBM Camp Builders working at Big Country Baptist Assembly in Lueders, north of Abilene. That two-week stay led to more work with Camp Builders. The Tennisons served with the group until 2000, working at 17 of 34 Texas camps closely tied to Texas Baptists.



Jack and Kathryn Tennison
have been married 73 years.
(Photo by Ferrell Foster /
Texans on Mission)

Their work, however, reached beyond Texas. Druin introduced Jack to Wilton Davis, who was going to Canada in 1995 to build an education building for Canadian Baptist Theological Seminary in Cochrane, Alberta. The Tennisons went with Davis and would go back more through the years, eventually coordinating summer volunteers for the seminary.

They eventually sold their house in Seguin and lived in an RV to make access to volunteer work sites easier.

In 1999, Tennison teamed with Eugene Esters, who worked in the aircraft industry in Fort Worth. "We were both working with Camp Builders, ... and the seminary asked us to come build a library and bookstore for them. Eugene is an excellent craftsman."

When they came back to Amarillo in 2000, Tennison said he asked Esters if he would like to start a furniture ministry. And they did it, starting at My Father's House, building furniture for 34 apartments for unwed mothers

and battered women—seven pieces of furniture for each apartment.

Next, they built the office furniture for what is now the Texans on Mission building in Dallas. And job followed job.

Building furniture as a ministry

Eventually, Tennison talked with Texans on Mission Executive Director Jim Ferguson about starting a furniture ministry in the organization. Tennison said he had one condition: “that anyone who comes in the shop can work, and that included women.”

That didn’t sit well with some, he said, but they moved forward and “lots of women” became involved. “They were excellent—hole drillers and running some of the machinery.”

Women did woodworking, but they also did other things. Druin spoke of the ministry the women had making clothes for families in the Rio Grande Valley. The team had a trailer for tools and another one to carry sewing machines.

The Tennisons’ furniture building efforts have had too many twists and turns to recount them all, but their hand-built furniture is still used in Havana, Cuba; Glorieta, N.M.; and Lake Tahoe, Nev., just to name a few places.



Jack Tennison retired from the college classroom, but he never retired from teaching—about woodworking and about following God’s calling. (Photo by Ferrell Foster / Texans on Mission)

There’s a connection between Tennison’s years as a professor and his years as a volunteer.

“I was in front of a group,” he said. “I made a comment about retiring from teaching. And nearly in mass they said, ‘You haven’t retired from teaching.’”

And he wants to teach more than about building furniture. He wants to teach others that they, too, can follow God’s calling and do the job they’re called to do, whether or not it has anything to do with building furniture.

Druin said Tennison, in all that he has done, has had “the impact that a humble Christian leader has. He’s touched lives everywhere he’s gone. He’s a positive role model. He works hard and works long hours. He’s 92, and he still works all the time.

“He’s just a dedicated Christian through and through, and he applies it to every aspect of his life,” Druin continued. “He lives it. He’s truly a role

model.”