

Meet Your Neighbor: Clem Kalupa

Clem Kalupa is a tall, broad-shouldered man, a farm boy from Michigan. He speaks slowly and deliberately, yet has retained the somewhat clipped accent of his childhood. You might call his diction a “Yankee drawl.” He walks briskly with a cane, and his penetrating blue eyes and erect bearing belie the serious auto accident and subsequent major stroke followed by several minor strokes that caused him to go to a retirement community in the first place. His wife Joan, an attractive petite brunette with a cheerful smile and spirit, visits him almost daily, and even a casual observer can see in their relationship the love and companionship that have come from their years together, celebrated just last week with a 60th anniversary party. Without trying to put this story together, Alice, here are the answers I got from Clem for your questions:

1. **When did you begin woodworking?** As a child he learned to “whittle” with a partially disabled war veteran uncle who helped the family work their farm. Aside from that he never had time to do anything of that sort until after his own accident and strokes, while in a recovery facility. One of the other residents there was a former sales rep for Dremel tools, and Clem, an electrical engineer, was fascinated to see what could emerge from a block of wood or even a prefab kit. The Dremel man helped him buy the equipment at a discount, and through his help and encouragement just three years ago Clem was launched on a hobby that has turned out to be fulfilling and fun for him. “I could never have gotten past first base without him,” Clem adds.
2. **How did you learn woodworking?** His Dremel friend taught him the rudiments and showed him his own examples. He also provided hundreds of pages of manufacturer’s literature, which Clem’s engineering background required him to organize into a thick notebook of how-to’s, ideas, patterns and everything related that Dremel had put out. The rest was learn as you go.
3. **How long have you lived at Treemont?** One and a half years.
4. **What did you do before you retired, career-wise?** He was an Electrical Engineer first for Exxon (five years in Venezuela, where he witnessed two shooting revolutions from the top floor of his hotel room); a stint with John Brown, Crawford & Russell; and Brown and Root, from which he retired fourteen years ago. At one time he had 325 electrical engineers worldwide under his supervision.
5. **Do you have more time for woodworking now?** He does not recall any unfulfilled longings during his varied and very busy engineering career. It was only after retirement and the physical challenges following his accident and strokes that he even began his woodworking, which has turned out to be a godsend for him. He considers his meeting with the Dremel man pure serendipity.
6. **What are some of the woodworking projects you’ve completed?** Lots of toys made from kits— cars, trains, planes, helicopters; many different animals chipped and carved from blocks of wood, small decorative crosses magnetized to go on the refrigerator (hundreds of these in many variations) and also standing crosses. He also designs and creates things by special request: a lady here asked him if he did owls (she was a Rice alum). He has completed eight owls so far.
7. **Does Treemont have a woodworking shop?** No, but there is a gazebo on the spacious lawn. It has electrical connections and he works there when he is sanding or painting. The rest he does in his own apartment. By the way, as an engineer he is cautious with dust and fumes, and uses goggles and a mask when those are involved. Incidentally, he does not need eyeglasses at all!
8. **What woods do you like to work with most?** His favorite is walnut when he can get it; however for painted pieces he uses whatever is handy.

9. **What's the largest project you've completed?** A tiger from a 14" block of wood will be the largest mass when completed. Of things completed he has made two canes or walking sticks. These are copies of an "ax-handle" cane he bought during his early retirement on a trip to Poland. He was impressed with this cane that looked like an ax, with a shaped handle covered with intricate carving, and a metal head or grip that even had a sharp edge on the back, like an ax. Checking with the airline he found that he could not board the plane with such a "weapon" so he took it back to the seller, who overnight replaced the metal head with a stylized eagle carved in wood with a spread and fanned tail where the sharp edge had been. Even so, for the flight home it had to be locked in with the pilot in his compartment. Clem has copied that cane twice for special friends. He noted with a chuckle that he had once actually used it as a weapon when he and his wife were accosted by a man on a darkened foreign street. He upset his assailant's balance by hooking the eagle's head around his legs, then began hitting him with the long handle. The would-be robber ran away as fast as he could get up and out of there.
10. **What do you do with the things you've made?** Many of them he gives away. Others he sells at hobby sales and art shows. Some he keeps for his own pleasure and sense of accomplishment.
11. **What do you do you receive from working with wood?** He derives real joy from producing things that people appreciate and want. There is also an intangible satisfaction in visualizing and creating something useful or beautiful, or both. He loves to take a plain block of wood, imagine what it could be, and then organize, list and do the steps it will take to transform it. It's an engineering thing as well as an artistic one. He feels that it has been helpful in restoring and maintaining his digital dexterity after his strokes, and also protecting him from arthritis in his hands, which are strong but soft and supple, with long, slender fingers and beautiful nails. There is no trace of callouses or any kind of distortion; his hands, in fact, are more like those of a musician than you would expect of a woodworker. Actually he took up violin as a youngster and in high school placed third in the state contest, so they are indeed the hands of a musician.
12. **How long have you lived in Houston?** Since 1966 (54 years)
13. **Why did you choose to live in Treemont's senior community?** He actually started out in another facility but did some comparison shopping while there and found Treemont be far the best buy and his preference.
14. **What is the best amenity Treemont offers so you can do your woodworking?** No special facilities for woodworking but for what he does he doesn't need anything more than the gazebo, where he can work in the open air with the roof to shelter him from the sun.
15. **Anything else you'd like to say?** Just an elaboration about Treemont. His analytical, engineering mind detailed exactly what led to his conclusion in Question 13.
- The management and staff's insistence that everything done for the residents is done right. In his word, they are "fantastic."
- The scrupulous cleanliness and prompt attention to housekeeping needs.
- The genuine care shown for the residents in an occasional emergency (such as Hurricane Ike) when elevators were out of service, but
- the staff brought hot meals to second and third floor residences who could not get to the dining room. They also brought fresh water twice a day and bottled water to keep on hand.
- The food--excellent and varied, with enough for seconds if you like. (Clem's physique demands no restrictions for him!)
- The available transportation by schedule or special requests for doctors, shopping, and the like.
- Plenty of planned activities and activities for those who want to participate, of such frequency and diversity that you have to choose

what you want to do There is also respect for the privacy of those who prefer that.

Despite the fact that many residents are on walkers or wheelchairs, a "life is good!" attitude permeates the place. There must be

some grumbling, but genuine complaints are taken care of quickly and well.

On a cost-comparison basis there is no question. Treemont wins hands down.

Treemont has a great diversity of people of all ages from 55 to 100+. They are from geographic origins not only all over the U.S. but

Also Cuba, China, France, and UK. Most are friendly and interesting, delightful people with so many skills and special expertise that you can always find someone congenial who is glad to help you with any question or need in any field.

Finally, there are some truly high-powered people here, gifted in many ways including wealth. There is, however, no shred of

pretention or ostentation, and in Clem's words "I am very comfortably at home here. It has felt like home from the beginning."
