



Tommy MacDonald, unvarnished

AS A KID, HE DREAMED OF BEING ON PBS. NOW, THE HUNKY WOODWORKER GETS HIS SHOT.

By Christopher Muther
GLOBE STAFF

CANTON — When he was a kid with sandy blond hair and a Boston accent thicker than a Friday backup on the Expressway, Thomas MacDonald would spend his Saturday afternoons glued to the TV watching “This Old House” and “The Victory Garden” on WGBH. One day, as Bob Vila and Norm Abram transformed a decaying Lexington farmhouse into a state-of-the-art family abode, he remembers telling his father, “Someday I’d like to do that.”

Now 44, MacDonald is finally getting his chance to run with the home-improvement gurus he admired growing up. This Saturday, his show, “Rough Cut — Woodworking With Tommy Mac,” debuts on PBS, and MacDonald will walk viewers through furniture-building projects he promises anyone can manage in his or her own home. A rotation of guests and friends drop by the show and refer to MacDonald as Tommy despite using his formal name for his business, Thomas J. MacDonald Fine Furniture.

The idea behind the show, in which the plain-talking MacDonald shows how to make step stools, night stands, and tables, is a focus on quality without snobbery. MacDonald is a bit like the guy you’d invite over for a Sunday afternoon of football and nachos. He’s perpetually attired in T-shirts and jeans, and addresses his viewers with a familiar “guys.” When he makes mistakes, he makes no attempt to disguise them.

“The woodworking world seems to have forgotten that it’s a layman’s profession,” MacDonald says one muggy day while shoot-

ing the series in his Canton workshop. “It’s for guys who have an aptitude, who can handle doing it. It’s not for the elite people of the world. People seem to forget that in the 1700s they were teaching 10-year-olds to do this work. You can easily do this stuff, you just need to be shown how to do it.”

MacDonald believes he’s just the guy to show America how to make, say, a well-constructed blanket box. The first season of the show has already been filmed, and there is funding for two more seasons. In each episode, MacDonald travels to a historic New England location, then finds inspiration there to build a piece of furniture in his workshop.

For all his skill, he understands the fear that grips many of us when it comes to taking on such projects, because he came to furniture making in adulthood. Despite the fact that MacDonald knew he wanted to wind up on PBS, he took a 15-year detour. At 19, MacDonald went into construction and spent years working on large-scale projects, from bridges to Logan Airport to the Big Dig.

“I was one of those guys who you would see hanging on by their toenails on job sites all around the city,” MacDonald says.

It took a separated shoulder to sideline his construction career. Several operations did little to help, so at 35, MacDonald needed to find a new profession.

“It was a real low point,” he recalls. “All of the sudden I couldn’t do everything that I had been doing since I was a kid.”

Until then, construction had been MacDonald’s life. A trou-

bled teen, he dropped out of Blue Hills Regional Vocational Technical High School, then wound up in a serious car crash. (Getting details from him about these events is akin to extracting steel stakes from concrete.) After recovering, he earned his GED, and immediately joined the carpenter’s union. His shoulder injury left him unsure what to do and desperate to figure out his future.

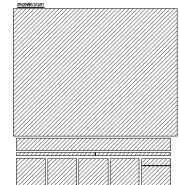
Dr. Arnold Scheller, his surgeon and former team physician for the Boston Celtics, suggested MacDonald look into the North Bennet Street School, the well-regarded craft and trade school in



the North End. Established in 1885, the school offers a variety of programs including furniture making, focusing techniques such as carving, inlaying, veneering, and hand joining.

As it turned out, the rough-around-the-edges MacDonald was an ideal match for refined furniture making. He started selling his intricately crafted pieces of 17th and 18th century-influenced furniture for tens of thousands of dollars. He even made appearances on the “Home Again” series, hosted by his childhood hero Vila.

As his reputation grew, Mac-





Donald started again to dream of hosting his own show on PBS.

"My friends over at BobVila.com gave me a camera, and I started to learn how to interact with it," he says. "I wasn't the most comfortable person in front of the camera. I don't like to have my picture taken and that kind of thing. But I just learned over the course of four or five years."

His primary means of practice was a podcast that he produced regularly for three years. Over the course of 300 episodes, he showed his thousands of podcast subscribers how to build pieces of furniture, including an elaborate Bombay secretary that wound up on display in a mu-

MacDonald's work includes (above) a Chippendale footstool with ball and claw feet; and (left) a Shaker-inspired nightstand.

seum. As he got better on camera, he began lobbying WGBH's Laurie Donnelly for his own show. MacDonald admits he was relentless. Donnelly, a veteran producer who works on "The Victory Garden," sensed strong potential when she first met MacDonald.

"I just liked him immediately," she says. "There are many different qualities that make someone successful on television. But what I love about Tommy is that he was the regular guy from Southie. He's an accessible, fun, easy-going guy making museum-quality work. I love that counterpoint in him."

It doesn't hurt that he looks good in a T-shirt, she adds.

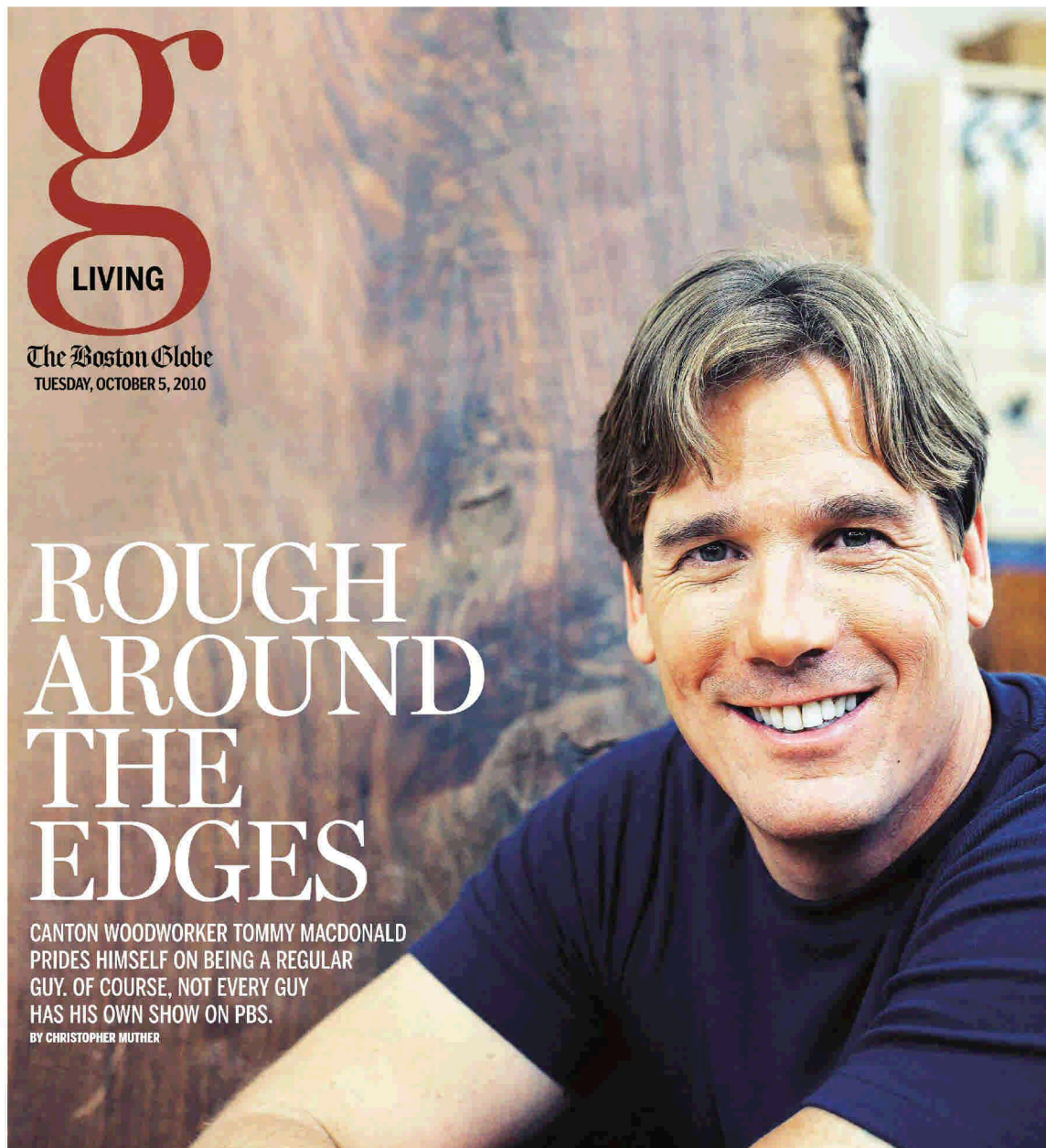
"Listen, just because he's hunky, I'm not going to hold that against him," she says. "You can't be hunky alone, there has to be

heart. So I would say that he's hunky with heart."

MacDonald confesses that he's still nervous when the cameras roll ("I'm nervous right now," he jokes during the interview), but his uneasiness doesn't show in early episodes. What is apparent is his love of furniture making, and, of course that Boston accent.

"I'm getting better, come on, man," he says, laughing. "I've really been listening to the way that I talk. But I grew up in Dorchester before we moved to Canton. I lived in Southie for 15 years. I worked in construction in Boston. It's always going to be there. If people like the show, they'll be able to deal with the accent."

Christopher Muther can be reached at muther@globe.com.



G

LIVING

The Boston Globe
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2010

ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES

CANTON WOODWORKER TOMMY MACDONALD
PRIDES HIMSELF ON BEING A REGULAR
GUY. OF COURSE, NOT EVERY GUY
HAS HIS OWN SHOW ON PBS.
BY CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

G FORCE

'BACK' TRACK

LOCAL PRODUCER'S HOMAGE
TO FAMED DYLAN ALBUM **PAGE 3**

ART

SHOW TIME

THE OTHER PRENDERGAST
GETS HIS DUE **PAGE 6**

STYLE

A GOOD FIT

NEW J. CREW STORE IS
TAILORED TO MEN **PAGE 8**

ALEX BEAM

CAL'S CALLING

'SILENT' PRESIDENT GETS
SOME ATTENTION **PAGE 23**



PHOTOS BY PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Tommy MacDonald gets a touch-up from makeup artist Sonja Gjokaj during the shooting of MacDonald's show, "Rough Cut," in his Canton studio.



Top: Filming the furniture-building show. Above: MacDonald talks with executive producer Laurie Donnelly and photography director Stephen D'Onofrio between takes.

