

The Friday School Tables

Two months after Katrina, I found myself sitting in the back of the Friday School room... watching the residents aggressively going after a Friday School case. I watched with pride, thinking about how remarkable it was that a team such as this could be so focused on learning.... and on taking care of each other... a mere forty days after the greatest natural disaster in US history.

From its renaissance in 2000, [the vision](#) had always been there: the Tulane Internal Medicine residency was to be a Team... a safe place where the best and brightest would learn to work as a part of a team, taking care of each other, and aspiring to goals that any one individual could not accomplish on his or her own. But now it was real... where all other residency programs wondered if they were a "team," the Tulane Internal Medicine Team knew it for sure. It had been tested, and nothing was found wanting.

I was so proud of this team. Many had lost everything in the hurricane.... And yet they returned to build clinics in the community, to staff what few hospital beds remained, and to be the last bastion in the care of those who had no where else to go. But as I sat there, I thought, *"Wow... it doesn't seem right that an accomplishment of this magnitude should fade into the dusk of history.... And it definitely doesn't seem right that a Team with this degree of character, this measure of self-sacrifice and devotion.... should be relegated to anything less than a 'palace' for its learning center."* And so as I sat in the back of the room, I began to sketch...

The first sketch was of the room itself. If **Team-based education** was to be our future, then the room should create an environment conducive to a team. It should feel like a living room, not a classroom. It should tempt people to want to come to Friday school... and it should invite them to stay. The old blinds would have to go; the coffee-stained carpet too.... replaced by nice curtains and new carpet. The small white board in the front would be replaced by floor-to-ceiling white-board cover... the whole wall would could be used by anyone at any time to draw, sketch or otherwise keep score of the Team's discussion. Though powerpoint would be largely forbidden (because its so painful and passive), the room would have a state of the art sound system and video capability. Leather chairs, befitting a board member of a Fortune 500 company, would replace the cheap-o rolling chairs.



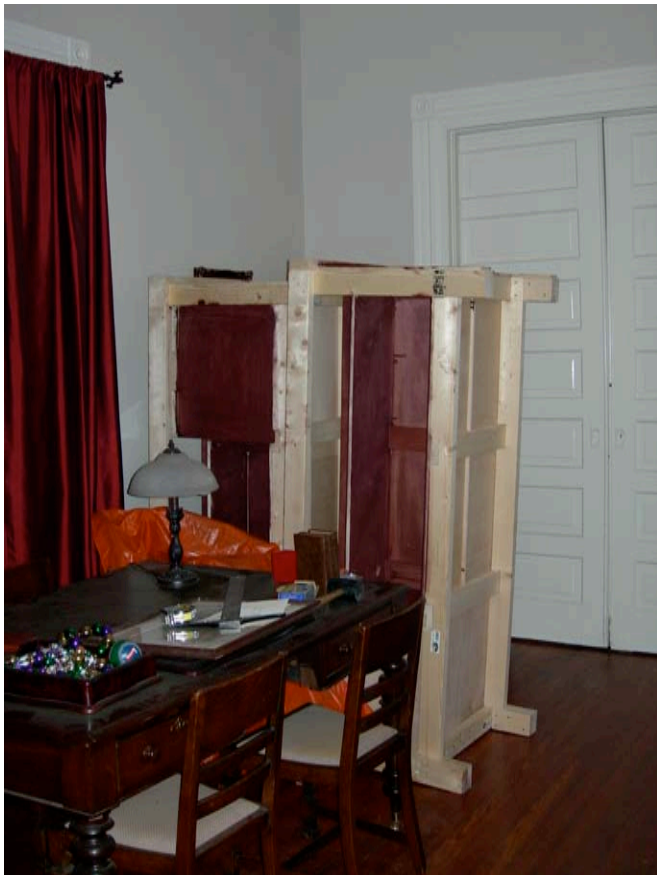
But we would need tables. I started by doing the on-line search... looking for something spectacular. Not hard to find, but at a cost of \$10,000 apiece, the school administration (again, we were in the wake of Katrina) laughed. So I said, "Fine, I'll build them myself." And so the eleven-month journey to build the Friday School Tables began....

I grew up on a farm, and where there was no TV or city-life distractions, wood-working became a hobby. It's about all you can do on a farm other than work. And I'll say from the outset that working with the "hard woods" has always been my penchant. Soft wood (i.e., birch, pine, and anything else you could buy at Home Depot, with the exception of oak) is much easier to work with. It cuts easy, it sands even easier... and it's cheap. But you get what you pay for... soft wood dents easy, it breaks easy, and there is no chance that it will ever be anything that it isn't already. It doesn't shine with buffing, and there is no color, grain or character to come from it. [Hard woods](#) on the other hand.... oak, ebony, cocobolo, purple heart, etc... are very different. Depending upon the challenge you are up for, they can be exceedingly hard to work with. One eight-foot plank can take 12 hours to sand properly. For some woods (like that used in the Friday School Tables), special diamond-carbide saw blades are required... and a lot of them. And hard woods are expensive... case in point, the lumber alone used in each Friday School table easily cost over two grand. But the rewards are incredible.... For when it is completed, you can count on the fact that nothing (save fire) can destroy the hard wood. It doesn't dent, it doesn't bow, and it definitely won't break. And the results are spectacular, for the hours of sweat that go into sanding down the hardwood brings out a luxurious grain, color and shine. Case in point... the wood you see in the Friday School tables has **not** been stained... it's the natural beauty of the wood.



The design of the tables was conceived to match the team-based, collaborative learning environment of [Friday School](#).

The carriage under each table houses each firm's own library of textbooks, and eight lap-top computers... both integral in the **active problem-solving that characterizes the Friday School curriculum**. The center-piece is inlaid with ceramic white-board, enabling the **across-the-table collaboration as the firm works as team in teaching each other**.





Once the under-carriage of each table was complete, the choice as to which type of wood be used had to be made. I chose Brazilian Blood Wood (otherwise known as Cardinal Wood) combined with Ebony for the trim. And I chose to buy only from companies that replant trees two-for-one to preserve the environment.

Blood Wood was not the cheapest choice by far, but it was the best choice.... **the properties of Blood Wood reflect the [characteristics of the Tulane Team](#).** Blood Wood is perhaps the most rare of all woods... reflecting the **uniqueness** of the Tulane residents. You can't just pick up Blood Wood at the Home Depot... you have to search all over the country to find it... so it is with the Tulane Team. **Selecting members to this team is a national search, looking for [those rare individuals who possess intellect, character, and personality](#).**

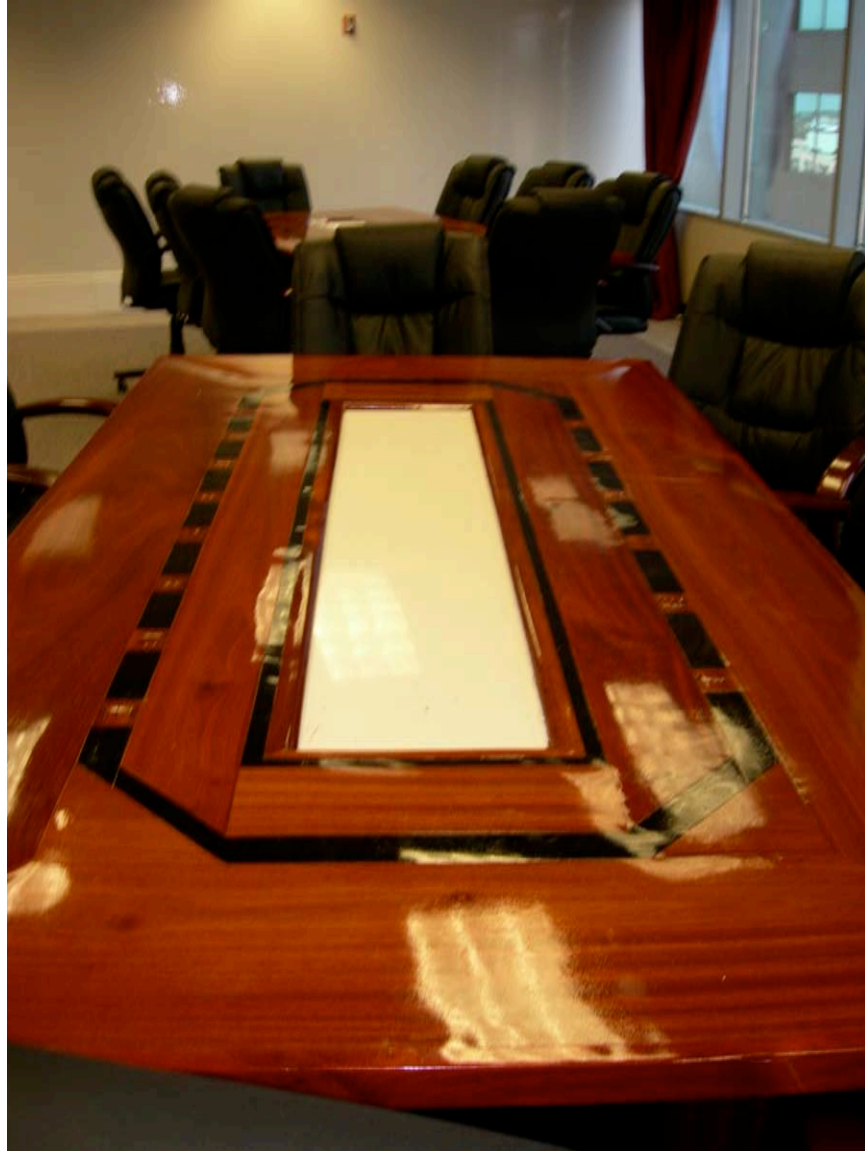
Blood Wood is not a pushover... it takes a lot of work to craft it into its final form. But it has character, and the potential for exceptional greatness when it is all said and done. So it is with the Tulane residents... **there are no saps on this team, no one who is merely going through the motions to get from point a to point b... and no one who is easily brought down.** No.... [The Tulane team is all about character](#)... the people are tough, and as Katrina illustrated, there is no challenge too large for them. They don't dent, and they don't break. The toughness of Blood Wood seemed to fit.







But when the sweat and tears are over.... There is nothing as beautiful as Blood Wood. No stains, paints or fancy coverings are needed to mask its internal beauty. Some have said you will know when you are finished with a Blood Wood project, because the wood seems to “turn on” as if it was plugged into an electric outlet. **This too, is a marker of the Tulane Team... with residents [leaving the Tulane program](#) as better physicians, but more importantly, [as better people](#).** Caring for the underserved is not easy... it taxes your soul if you really get into it. But that’s our mission, and for the Tulane Residents who traverse that road during their training, they emerge as refined, soulful, and deep-thinking people. One look in their eyes, and you will know that it is true. It is as if their soul had been “turned on” as if it was plugged into an electric outlet.



Such is my philosophy on life and teams. And as the [Coach of this Tulane Team](#), it is a choice (on both accounts) that I made easily, and one that I would make again. I want hard wood for my projects, and I want “hard people” for my teams. You can take the easy road if you want ... but you’ll always end up with something that looks cheap and quickly fades. If you want a championship caliber team... one that can stand up to any challenge and take on any mission... then you begin with the right people. You begin with those who have the character and beauty within, and you work as much as it takes to hone these virtues to the beauty they become.