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## Solid wood, crafted in Northwest

Don Willis: Furniture store sells local products

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In an era when more and more of America's furniture is made overseas, Don Willis Furniture relies on Pacific Northwest craftsmen for the bulk of the bookcases, bedroom sets and other pieces adorning its showrooms.

It's a practice that's helped keep the family-run business going in Western Washington for more than six decades.

"We've always worked with Northwest manufacturers," said company owner Paul Willis, 61, of Kent. "I grew up with it. So it was natural for me to stay this way. ... In the last five years we've really promoted it more. People appreciate that it's made locally; we're not getting it from China."

Willis' father – boatbuilder and cabinetmaker Don Willis – founded the business in 1948. The inaugural store was in Lake City in Seattle, with later stores opening in Ballard, Tacoma in 2007, and Federal Way last fall.

Don Willis died in 1996, and his wife, Lillian, who was also instrumental in the business, died in 1993. But the business lives on under Paul Willis' leadership, specializing in custom solid-wood furnishings made of wild cherry, maple, oak, birch, parawood and bamboo, among other woods.

Willis estimates that 70 percent of the store's offerings are manufactured in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. Local furniture-makers include American Woodcraft in Tacoma, Grand Wood in Lakewood and TNT in Thurston County.

Besides pumping money into the local economy, working closely with small, local furniture craftsmen allows the business to meet individual customer needs, Paul Willis said.

Need a bookcase in a particular type of wood to fit an odd-sized wall? Buyers can order one at the desired dimensions.

"A lot of times if it's from overseas, they make one night stand, one chest of drawers and that's the set you buy," Willis said. "We might have 50 pieces that can go with one (furniture) group, so you can customize it to your bedroom size or the size you need."

Locally-made pieces are available finished or unfinished.

One wall of the Tacoma store is covered with samples of furniture wood finished in various stain and varnish combinations. Customers opting for unfinished furniture can buy the stains and varnishes on the spot or have the store staff do the work for an additional fee.

The business's emphasis on Northwest suppliers is an attraction for repeat customers such as James and JoAnn O'Neill. The couple most recently bought two coffee tables, a sofa table and corner cabinet. The Red Oak furnishings blend well with their Craftsman-style home in Tacoma's North End, said James O'Neill, a retired teacher.

"We like buying local merchandise," he said. "What's nice about buying local is you can get it serviced locally."

Still, the couple shopped around before settling on Willis. They found the choices at big-name variety stores were made of particle board. Comparable items at high-end furniture stores cost one half to a third more than at the Willis store, O'Neill said.

"The pieces from Don Willis are all solid wood, all the way through," O'Neill said.

Willis Furniture stores do business in freestanding buildings, not in malls, which helps keep down costs, Willis said. In addition, neither the stores nor their suppliers do a lot of advertising or provide fancy handouts. Dealing mainly with Northwest firms also means shipping costs, if any, are lower than at other stores.

The Tacoma storefront, for instance, is a modest affair in a business strip that includes an auto repair shop next to Tacoma Boys produce store. Dining room and bedroom sets are arranged in a plain, cavernous building. "We don't have the overhead a large store has," Willis said.

Frank and Mary Treese were attracted by the store's ability to custom match the knotty-pine walls in their recently remodeled

basement in Port Orchard.

They bought a knotty pine desk, hutch and two bookcases; they had the store apply a natural, satin epoxy to the pieces. When the pieces arrived several weeks ago, the couple were so pleased with the result they ordered matching wooden file cabinets, a TV stand and more bookcases. They'll end up spending about \$3,500 on the furniture, Frank Treese said.

"We wanted a custom thing made to fit," he said. "I have to tell you, it was a successful venture."

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#### **About the stores**

Don Willis Furniture has four stores, including two in Seattle. Here are two in the South Sound:

**Tacoma** – 5510 Sixth Ave., 253-756-0998

**Federal Way/Kent** – 26830 Pacific Highway S., 253-839-3095

Its Web site is [donwillisfurniture.com](http://donwillisfurniture.com).

#### **Tips from Paul Willis on buying furniture:**

1. Try out the drawers and examine the drawer slides to see how easily they slide.
2. Keep in mind that unassembled furniture typically isn't as sturdy as furniture assembled at the factory.
3. Look at the interior of the piece, especially with cabinets. Those with lateral supports framing the piece are stronger than those without.
4. Solid wood is generally sturdier than veneer over particle board. Once veneer, the thin layer of real wood or other material that's glued to the board, is nicked, it fractures and deteriorates. Solid wood might get dented but it won't continue to deteriorate. And screws won't strip out of solid wood as easily as they would out of a particle board core.



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