



# A cross-country CMA collaboration

Three shop owners from different states get together for a day of work and sharing.

**T**his is the story of an offhand conversation that is becoming a grassroots movement.

In early October, the Cabinet Makers Association hosted a two-day regional event in New York that featured tours of Long Island shops and two NYC showrooms.

In the run-up to the event, CMA board member Chris Dehmer (Dark Horse Woodworks, Atlanta) called CMA president Matt Krig (Northland Woodworks, Blaine, MN) to run an idea by him: Why don't we stay a couple of extra days to check out Leland Thomasset's shop? Thomasset owns Taghkanic Woodworking in Pawling, NY, and has been active in the CMA for years.

Krig was on board, and they both envisioned a hands-on visit in which they would jump in and work with Thomasset.

"Leland has become a close friend over the last couple of years through the CMA, and we all have a good time and a ton of laughs whenever we get together,

plus even manage to learn some valuable things," Krig recalled in a post on the CMA forum. "This was an amazing idea."

So Dehmer and Krig asked Thomasset what he thought, and he agreed, though not without a few reservations.

"I know Leland expressed some trepidation prior to our arrival that we would be judging him as he bared the soul of his business," Krig wrote in his post. "I think that's a normal feeling knowing other cabinetmakers are coming into your shop."

## Tri-state alliance

So what happened when Minnesota and Georgia came to New York?

"When Matt and I went to Leland's shop," Dehmer says, "we went in work clothes and helped with the day's work. We assembled cabinets, did some edge-banding, helped with miter-folding, helped with the CNC and also got a hands on-with Cabinet Vision. We also were able to interact with his shop foreman and get her perspective on current

processes and frustrations. I think this approach gave us a much better understanding of how work flowed through the shop and also let us really get a feel for the processes that were in place."

Thomasset is an expert in the software Dehmer uses to make cabinets, and he says it was valuable to have time to work with him on the software. What else did he learn? "As usual, it was the little stuff for me," he says.

Krig says they worked through a small project to get a full understanding of how Thomasset's shop works. "We gave our opinions on a few things as outsiders and talked through pains we all experience and become numb to, and the why and what of his shop," he says. "We had a ball."

What did Thomasset think of this impromptu visit?

"It was a humbling experience to have two friends offer their time away from their families and businesses to help me work on mine," he says. "I was

able to learn a great deal about what we may want to change and what we were doing right, and Matt and Chris were able to take away a few tips for their operations. We have already changed some parts of our operational procedures (starting the Monday after Matt and Chris left!). We went from processing 3-4 sheets an hour on one job to 6+ sheets per hour.”

They also suggested lowering the shop’s assembly benches, Thomasset says, which they found to be a big improvement. The funny thing, he adds, is that the benches were adjustable height all along, but it had’nt occurred to lower them.

### A spark

When Krig posted about the visit on the CMA forum, his point wasn’t just to tell a nice story.

He and Dehmer had shared their experience with the CMA board and there was unanimous agreement: They wanted to figure out how to help create more of these intimate, hands-on experiences where a few CMA members can gather to offer constructive criticism of workflow, operations and any other observations and take away some great lessons.

“We are looking for feedback, interest and even [whether] people want to offer to set up some times and places to try it out,” he said in his post. “This is going to be very self-driven and organized by those hosting, but we’ll be happy to offer advice based on our experience. We had a truly fun time and simply asked a lot of ‘Why this way?’ and ‘What happens if you do this?’ kinds of questions. Everything was positive and spoken from the heart because we care and want to improve ourselves and others.”

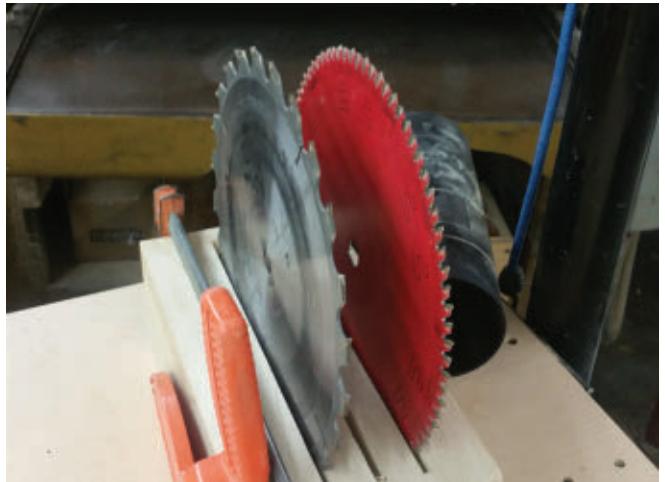
Even outside of any informal visits the CMA helps facilitate, there’s “no reason a few local members cannot self-organize something within reasonable driving distance and bring lunches or something to grill,” he added. “My hope in sharing this is that you will offer to host a small group of members in your shop in the next twelve months.”

### Writing the next chapter

It’s clear that the experiment in New York brought more than just work takeaways for the three cabinet makers. There was plenty of camaraderie, and that’s an important part of the story for them as well.

“I am grateful to these two guys for the experience and

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The shop involved sharing tricks and tips and gave the out-of-state shop owners a chance to see how another shop does things. This saw blade caddy is an example.



Leland Thomasset hosted the event at his shop, Taghkanic Woodworking in Pawling, NY.



Here’s the view of the Taghkanic Woodworking shop from the loading dock.



In an unusual collaboration, three Cabinet Makers Association members from three different states converged on one shop to work, learn and share experience. Matt Krig of Northland Woodworks, Blaine, MN, came ready to work.

especially to Leland's gracious wife Gina for an unforgettable traditional Italian dinner!" Krig wrote in his CMA post. "A word of caution – pace yourself if you are ever fortunate enough to share a meal at the Thomasset's table, as it just keeps coming, and you must leave room for dessert!"

Krig and Dehmer also ended up taking a side trip from the shop and hiking a bit of the Appalachian Trail.

In hearing the three talk about the visit all these weeks later, it's apparent that they didn't know just how inspiring the off-the-cuff idea would prove to be.

"Weeks later, we are still thanking each other for what we learned, implementing changes in all three of our shops and giving updates," Krig says. "While it was not cheap, as we had some lodging, food and travel expenses, the experience was invaluable, and I hope that these guys (and more) will come to my shop next summer to give me an earful."

Thomasset is happy to have been part of the experiment, and he hopes the enthusiasm expands among other CMA members. (Multiple conversations about planning more "work visits" are happening on the CMA forum.)

"We did quite a bit of talking about what it was that we were doing together," he says, "and how it could or would really help grow the CMA in the way its founding fathers pictured it – cabinet makers helping cabinet makers, with hands-on learning and teaching each other." **+**



## Recipe for a great "work visit"

Krig and Dehmer offered some specific advice on how to make these get-togethers effective.

### 1. Keep it small.

"After leaving Leland's shop, we talked about how important it was to keep it small — for instance, saying you could invite only as many people as you could ride in a car with," Krig said. "This would create the special sauce that allows each person a chance to get in, do the work and share in-depth observations."

Thomasset agreed and added that keeping it local (or regional) might also be helpful from an expense standpoint, but "travel is always good for getting a new perspective."

### 2. Don't just drop by and observe at a shop for a couple of hours – plan a true work day.

"What made it work for me was being a part of an entire work day and being able to see the flow of work," Dehmer says. Krig echoed this. "Be willing to get dirty and do what they do, not just be a passive observer," he says.

### 3. Be honest – and be ready to hear honest feedback.

"I want to hear it all – good and bad," Dehmer says. "Don't be sitting in your car driving home thinking 'Why the hell does he do it that way?' I want to hear it. If my feelings get hurt, so be it – I promise I'll get over it. To me, this is the only way this works for all involved."



Participants said it was lots of little things they learned from, such as this storage center for abrasives, glue and other supplies.