

**Sarah Estrapala**

My maiden name was Estrada, and Sara's maiden name was Pala. We had dated for several years and planned to get married and we really didn't want to take each other's names. We knew that we wanted to have children or a child, so we didn't want a hyphenated name. When you get married, you can basically make whatever name you want if you choose to do so. So we decided to combine our names and made our last name Estrapala.

**Olivia Maillet**

When did woodworking pique your interest?

**Sarah Estrapala**

I have a background in art. I went to school to become an art teacher. I have a degree in drawing and art teacher education. So, that creativity and expression and making things has always been a part of who I am. But then at some point, I pivoted away from art. When I realized there were no jobs in it, I went to grad school for special education. When I ended up finishing my Ph.D., as a gift to myself, I wanted a really nice desk. Really nice desks are also really expensive. So, instead of buying a finished desk, I just bought a really beautiful piece of wood and I'm like, 'I'm going to learn how to make this into my own desk.' So, that happened in the spring of 2020, and I really just got hooked on it from there. It was the first time I'd done anything with really beautiful wood or any sustained project with wood, and it's kind of indescribable what happens when you take a raw piece of material and just turn it into something so beautiful that you get to use. That after my desk I just wanted to build everything that belonged in our house. Like, the capabilities were unbelievable.

**Olivia Maillet**

And I see on your website you've combined the wall art aspect and the woodworking aspect too, with burl wood.

**Sarah Estrapala**

Oh, that is for sure my favorite type of wood. Any species of tree can create a burl, which is basically an irregular cell growth pattern that makes what looks like a tumor. Either you can see it growing on the side of a tree, like a giant bulge, or they grow at the roots where the roots grow— like it comes out of the ground. They might be like a giant mound where the tree comes out.

Honestly, on a tree, they look really gross— they're not appealing-looking or esthetically pleasing. But sometimes when you cut them open, depending on the species of tree and the health of the tree, they can reveal the most wild colors and textures and grain patterns.

Back after I made my desk I wanted to build everything that we could possibly build that would fit in our new house. And when we when we moved to Columbia, we quickly learned that woodworking is a very expensive hobby. My wife Marika, got pretty upset with me for spending money that we didn't have.

She basically told me I had to start selling stuff to pay for things, but, in addition to that, I thought it might be a really great idea to get her into woodworking. So I was constantly asking her to take a class and try her hand at woodworking to get her into it and to get her craving that next project.

**Marika Estrapala**

Yeah. So at the time we moved to Columbia, we had a six-week-old and the pandemic was at its height. So, Sarah was using woodworking as a little therapeutic-some-time-away, and I didn't really have that. And so she encouraged me to do it as well. And I also fell in love with it.

**Sarah Estrapala**

Yeah, I love making custom work. It's a really interesting process of figuring out what they want, especially if they are they're not knowledgeable or familiar with wood, woodworking or processes. Like it's a different language that you learn, but with any specialty and trying to figure out that middle ground to make them something that's feasible within their budget.

**Marika Estrapala**

It's anxiety-provoking because you want them to be happy. I always kind of lower my expectations of how excited they'll be when they get it, and then that usually exceeds my expectations and that feels great. You always want to make the customer happy. Like Sarah was saying, sometimes people don't really they don't even know what they want. And so you kind of work with them and show them different options.

**Sarah Estrapala**

And the best ones are, 'I have these parameters and this budget, go nuts.'

**Olivia Maillet**

That's so fun because you have so much creative liberty.

**Sarah Estrapala**

Uh-huh, and then you can use it as like a learning experience.

**Marika Estrapala**

And people trust us to do that which fascinates me. I don't have that much trust in somebody else. Like, I'm very I want to know exactly what it's going, I want to have my voice in there. And some people say, 'You make beautiful work. I want a cutting board. That's the size. This is my budget. What can you do?' And I'm just like, 'Wow'.

**Olivia Maillet**

Yeah, you just don't give yourselves enough credit. They probably see all the beautiful woodworking on your website and trust you enough to be able to create their vision.

**Sarah Estrapala**

Yeah. On the other hand, though, it has taken us a while to learn how to say no. For me personally, the longer I've been here working for MU, the busier I have gotten. So my ability to take on custom work has gotten significantly diminished. So I can't, I have to tell myself, I can't say yes very often. And if I say yes, it has to be for something really special. But also, as we've learned, we've only been doing this for like three years, we've started to learn what we like and what we're good at and what we want to learn if there's something, a new skill or strategy.

### **Olivia Maillet**

What's the most exciting custom project that you've worked on?

### **Sarah Estrapala**

So when I said it's awesome when they say, 'These are my parameters, here's my budget, go nuts', it's because that's what happened with this really awesome project. It's a woman who I met years and years ago when I was an undergrad, and we've loosely kept in touch just on Facebook, as she apparently had been watching us with our woodworking.

She was our very first customer who ordered something that was like not Marika's mom. And then over the years, she was just like randomly ordering stuff from us. So I think when she reached a certain point, she just wanted something really magnificent because she had just custom-built her home. And she lives in Michigan.

She had these two spaces in her living room that were on either side of her fireplace. She wanted to fill a five-foot by five-foot square with the framed burl pieces that I make. So she gave me a very healthy budget, and we kept in contact through the whole design process, and she was very trusting of the things that I needed to do and the decisions I had to make throughout that. And they came out amazing.

It took me probably eight months to make just with having a full-time job and a family and a child. But it was the most rewarding and intense project that I've ever made, and it's probably going to be that way for quite a while.

### **Marika Estrapala**

It was one of those like, you feel like we've made it. I mean, that's hard to say, but in that moment it felt like, is this really happening? Like she wants something so profound in her home that's made by us and she trusts us to do that. The business really grew organically. I started getting more involved and it just continued to grow. We did a couple pop-up shows and we were encouraged to start a website. So it just really grew exponentially from there.

### **Sarah Estrapala**

Yeah. And then so when we would get requests for items, there were certain things that I just didn't really have any interest in learning. They were inspiring to me. Things like cutting boards, where Marika fortunately loves to make cutting boards. They can be really complex and require a lot of skill and patience and repetition, which for me, that's just not very appealing, but for her, she loves it and that's kind of how our division of the things that we like to make started.

Like a commission would come in a request and I'd be like, that sounds really interesting. I want

to do that. And then there were things that came in and that Marika had skills like the cutting boards or anything with engraving. I have never learned how to do technology or engraving. So those always go to Marika. And that's kind of how we branched into our areas of specialty. Like I like the more complex problem-solving projects like the wall art.

**Marika Estrapala**

She likes measuring and I don't.

**Sarah Estrapala**

Yeah, yeah. Like problem-solving, I always come back to that– it's fascinating– but Marika likes more process-oriented. Like she can get very, very precise at doing a certain thing over and over again and she gets really, really good at it.

**Marika Estrapala**

So, I make really intricate, tiny, detailed earrings and I basically just start with scrap wood. So we start from a huge slab and then just use it and use it and use it and break it down until we have tiny pieces. And then I will turn those into jewelry. And I just really enjoy taking cut-offs and making them into something beautiful and utilizing as much of the wood as I can so that very little goes to waste and very little gets burned.

**Olivia Maillet**

Yeah, that sounds very sustainable because as you mentioned, like woodworking is very expensive. What other measures have you taken to keep it sustainable?

**Sarah Estrapala**

We never just get rid of wood. It's very, very hard to put anything in the burn pile. It literally has to be completely unusable for us to put it in the burn pile.

**Marika Estrapala**

And even to notate that, like I do have some pieces that are pretty useless to me, but I have a local artist friend and she does multimedia and I will give her my wooden scraps and she will use it in her art. Very little goes to waste. And I enjoy that because she sees something in it different than I do. We go straight to the different sawmills and not just locally, so we are kind of eliminating the middleman. We don't buy a lot of wood from big-box stores. We buy them from the other small guys. So we're supporting small businesses as well.

**Sarah Estrapala**

Yeah. And when we do that, a lot of times since we're really creative with our use of wood in terms of how we use the biggest piece all the way down to all of our cut-offs. We're really creative with how we use the wood and sometimes the weirder the wood, the better for our purposes. But for a sawmill who makes and processes wood for building instruments or guitars or something, it's not so good for them. So we'll reach out to these sawmills who specialize in really unique woods for musical instruments, and we'll say, 'Hey, can you send us a flat rate box

full of interesting cut-offs, dealers choice', and then when we get it, it's like Christmas morning because we don't know what we're going to get. And it can be the most awesome stuff that we never would have imagined or even knew existed. We can just turn it into magic.

### **Olivia Maillet**

It's the artist process. And I feel like you guys are in the perfect place. Like Columbia has so many artists. Like you were saying before, one man's trash is another man's treasure, you know? And when you guys did move to Columbia and start your business, I have noticed that woodworking is a mainly male-dominated business. How did you break your way into crushing that stigma?

### **Sarah Estrapala**

For me, if I'm interested, I'm going to do it. No matter what. I mean, honestly, if I'm passionate about something, I don't really care what other people think. So I was going to learn it anyway.

### **Marika Estrapala**

Yeah, that's kind of whether we had people supporting us or not, it's something that we felt like we could teach ourselves or we could ask for help, and if people were willing to help, then that's great. And I think we have been 100% supported by males in the industry, if not more. I think they love seeing young females taking interest in something that has been predominantly male. I have joined the mid-Missouri Wood Turners Association and it's predominantly older males and they have taken me in with open arms. They give me all their scraps so I can make earrings. They are they're just all for it because it's something that they don't want to be lost, you know, and they want to teach younger generations. And why not a younger-generation female? Because we also see things differently. We make it differently. We have a different process. And I know that some women have struggled. We have other woodworker friends that we have met through social media and different things. And they have expressed difficulties with going into lumber stores and presenting themselves in these situations.

### **Sarah Estrapala**

I will say it depends on where we're going and for the kind of response, for example, if we visit a sawmill or somebody who has their own lumber milled, like just some country-folk guy who's selling wood out of his basement, they're kind and generous, and we never feel threatened or alienated because we're two women. Or with our the local supplier we use from Jefferson City for most of our wood, they've always been really great to us.

I think it's different when you go into a big box store, you know, like Home Depot or Lowe's or Menards and you're going tool shopping, that that can be a bit different. We might get a lot of assumptions that we don't know what we're asking for, or like the old guy who's stocking the screws doesn't understand that I know exactly what I'm looking for, like a very specific type of supply.

### **Marika Estrapala**

Or they think I'm shopping for my husband.

**Sarah Estrapala**

Yeah, yeah, we used to actually we used to get that comment. Maybe we get it once for a big show, but we used to get it more often in the beginning. Did your husband make all of that?

**Marika Estrapala**

The longer that we have been in the area and at more shows, people know who we are, and at most shows, we're together and our signage says woman-owned business. But I do find it kind of comical. I just let it roll off my sleeve. I don't let it bother me. And I love being an example for young girls. We have a daughter, she's almost four, and she loves to be in the woodshop. She doesn't know any different. Her moms are woodworkers, you know, and when we are at pop-up shows, we are something for younger women, older women to come and see like, this can be done. You can do this, you can be successful. And I just love being able to have that representation.

**Sarah Estrapala**

Next, I want to build my daughter's bed. I've been wanting to do that. I'm waiting for the summer after art in the park. That's going to be my next big project— to build my daughter's bedroom.

**Marika Estrapala**

I will also personally start teaching woodworking classes at the MACCLab, which if people aren't familiar with that, it's a maker space that's in the Parkade building through Moberly Area Community College, and it's really supportive of makers of all different kinds. But I will be the new woodworking teacher. So that is also another way to show, like women in the trades. So I'm really excited about that opportunity.