

Pacific Perfection: making the old new again

Craftsmen Katie Rathmell: Pacific Window Restoration

When asked, most visitors as well as native Astorians will tell you that one of the town's most notable qualities is its historic homes and buildings. Upon first glance it's easy to take a structure on aesthetics alone, overlooking the painstaking work that goes on behind the scenes, so to speak. From the historic Flavel House Museum to its more notorious sibling currently undergoing a celebrated restoration, the life and legacy of a house is, more often than not, in the details.

Katie Rathmell, owner and operator of PACIFIC WINDOW RESTORATION LLC, (PWR), has devoted herself to such details, specializing in the restoration and preservation of wood windows and leaded glass in the region's homes and historic buildings. A former research scientist of 15 years, holding degrees in both biology and marine science, Rathmell admits she was looking to take a new direction in her work and apply her skills to running a business of her own.

"I've always loved old homes and buildings," she says. "I restored my first home which was a 1920's bungalow in California many years ago. I worked on the MERTS campus with OHSU for 7 years and became aware of the historic preservation program offered at Clatsop College. I met Pam Chestnut, chair of the Lower Columbia Preservation Society, who initially turned me on to window restoration." She continues, "The Historic Preservation Program at Clatsop College offers classes that give people a good start on restoration work, and they have involved some of the most talented craftspeople in the area to help teach subjects such as millwork and energy efficiency. I took many of the classes and got a lot out of them."



Katie Rathmell, owner of Pacific Window Restoration.

Since its official start in April of 2014, PWR has built a steady clientele that includes historic home and building owners, as well as the real estate community. Services include sash cord replacement, wood rot repair, joint stabilizing, weather stripping, glass replacement, and air intrusion elimination--to name just a few. Landmarks such as the Commodore, Astor, and Norblad hotels all boast the work of PWR, and Rathmell takes particular

pride in the Astoria Column's cupola restoration. While many of the repairs necessary in historic homes and buildings may appear daunting, Rathmell notes that wood windows in the Pacific Northwest are made from old growth cedar and Douglas fir, which are naturally pest resistant and of superior craftsmanship.

"The wood windows always look better than replacements, and they can be restored most of the time," she says. "If they

are too far gone, we can build new parts for them or an entirely new sash. We've expanded to replicate the old sash for people with

historic homes. We also have a method of weather-stripping that keeps the drafts and moisture out." She continues, "The weather here is particularly harsh on windows, but they were made with excellent products, and with proper care and maintenance they can last another 100 years."

Conservation is one of Rathmell's top priorities, and her extensive scientific background provides much of the foundation for eliminating inadequate--and often unethical--products and approaches.

"One of the things people do to their old homes is replace their old wood windows with vinyl, thinking that they're going to save money," Rathmell says. "When you compare the cost of vinyl and the carbon footprint it has, it takes about 30 years to offset the energy that goes into making and shipping them."

As part of PWR's ongoing mission to promote safe and sustainable practices, Rathmell and her staff work to retain as much of the original wood as possible when repairing windows suffering from wood rot; if new parts are needed, matching wood is utilized from old growth trees stored by expert craftspeople. Furthermore, any lead paint (a common concern in homes built before the 1970's) is safely removed and contained so that the area that has been disturbed is safe for human contact.

In addition, the cost of restoration is recouped by the home owner in reduced heat loss, reduced air intrusion, tax credits for increasing the efficiency of your home and lasts much longer than a vinyl or aluminum replacement window.

Praise for Rathmell's work has been considerable, the proof not only in the finished product but outpouring of positive feedback from former and ongoing clients alike. Laura Rogers, who purchased the Robert Young Historical House two years ago, hired PWR to restore the original windows from 1875 upon a recommendation from City Hall's Rosemary Johnson. "This place was an absolute wreck," Rogers says. "I think out of the four contractors that worked in and out of here Katie [Rathmell] was the most professional. She's an absolute perfectionist, and her work is immaculate. She was just the most fantastic person to work with." Rogers adds, "I ended up sending Rosemary Johnson a thank you card when it was all done. I can't recommend Katie enough."

Ultimately, Rathmell's pride and passion for historic Astoria is the driving force behind Pacific Window Restoration. Each and every commission, however great or small, contributes to sustaining and revitalizing the town's most invaluable landmarks. "Astoria is unique because most of the houses and buildings here were built in the late 1800's to early-mid 1900's," Rathmell says. "We have a treasure trove of old homes and they are all in need of some maintenance. We get them back in working order."

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Left: A new window sash is sexy.

Right: Rathmell onsite, restoring the Astor Column cupola.