Sophomore Brian Haidet turns a glass bead over a flame, embellishing it with bands of color. Katie Allen saws a wooden shelf for a jewelry box she designed. A group of women talk quietly with instructor Naomi Profesorsky as they weave beaded pendants. Down the hall, the Twisted Thread Fiber Arts Guild holds its monthly meeting. And across the lobby, artist Kirk Adam’s students prepare canvases and paint with acrylics.

The Crafts Center is all about shaping – be it making a work of art or broadening the perspectives of those who come by to create. Even the center itself has morphed – from the $16 million 2008-09 renovation of its home base, Frank Thompson Hall, to revamped program offerings designed to serve today’s endlessly busy students.

It’s an exciting time for the center, and for those who use it.

Take Anne McLean. At 21 and in her senior year as a polymer and color chemistry major in the College of Textiles, McLean has tried her hand at a variety of crafts at the center, from jewelry wire-wrapping to metal-working and soldering, wood-turning and ceramics. She now teaches classes in several of these skills, as well as Coptic bookbinding, and she works at the front desk.

“I very quickly became attached. It’s a pretty inviting place,” says McLean, who first explored the center while on a tour with her Arts Village dormmates. Located on Jensen Drive on the lower level of Thompson Hall, the Crafts Center may feel a little off the beaten path. Enter the doors, though, and you’ll be amazed at the magnitude of activity occurring, McLean says.

The Thompson renovations made the Crafts Center even more of a vital resource for artists. From the new, cutting-edge torch system for lampwork and off-mandrel glass classes to new pottery kilns and wheels, new woodworking equipment, lighted window displays, 60” monitors to support instruction, and other technological upgrades, the center has taken a dramatic leap from its best-kept-secret past.

“It’s cool because when you walk down that little drive, you see the windows, you see the art in them, you see some people moving around in there,” McLean says. “But it’s not until you walk
through that door that you really get a sense of how big it is and all the things that are happening inside.

“It’s pretty awesome.” Allen, the woodworker, recently moved to Raleigh from the Chicago area precisely because of the Crafts Center. Her parents had a shop in their basement, where she made wooden dolls. She knew she’d miss it too much if she moved just anywhere. She liked North Carolina, so she Googled her woodworking desires, and up popped the Crafts Center.

Upon arriving, the 26-year-old promptly signed up for a woodworking class taught by Crafts Center director George Thomas and instructor Evan Lightner, and she spent one to two nights a week designing and building her jewelry box and learning as much as she could about the massive array of tools and machines in the spacious wood shop.

Thomas knows that hunger well. He discovered the Crafts Center in 1978, while majoring in technology education at NC State. He dove in full-force, heading to the wood shop four to five nights a week to practice woodcarving and learn to make furniture. But it wasn’t just his woodworking knowledge that expanded in those heady days. Thomas says he also learned a lot about life from the people around him – most notably from his mentor, Doreen Underwood, who had worked with President Eisenhower’s Supreme Allied Command in Europe during World War II and had many a tale to tell.

“I was hooked from day one,” Thomas says of the center, which opened in 1964 and is now one of the largest university crafts centers in the nation. “I camped out by the door, hoping a job would come open.” He served as a student volunteer during college and a community volunteer thereafter, while teaching wood shop full-time at East Garner Middle School. After Underwood retired in 1990, Thomas became assistant director and then associate director. When longtime director Jim Pressley retired in 2007 (having started his own career there as a student volunteer 42 years earlier), Thomas became interim director, a position that became permanent as the center prepared for its grand reopening in 2009.

Now Thomas and his staff are on a mission to make sure that everyone in the local community – most notably NC State students – has the opportunity to be hooked just as he was, whether it’s for a weekend pinhole camera competition, a $5 intro class, a skateboard-making workshop, troubleshooting for an engineering class project or, like McLean, for years of multi-media exploration. Haidet, the glass-worker, says he loves balancing his material science and physics studies with a night at the studio, turning out beads, marbles and other creations. “Sometimes after a whole bunch of exams, I come in here and flame-work for hours,” he says. “If something goes wrong, you can always make another bead.”

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