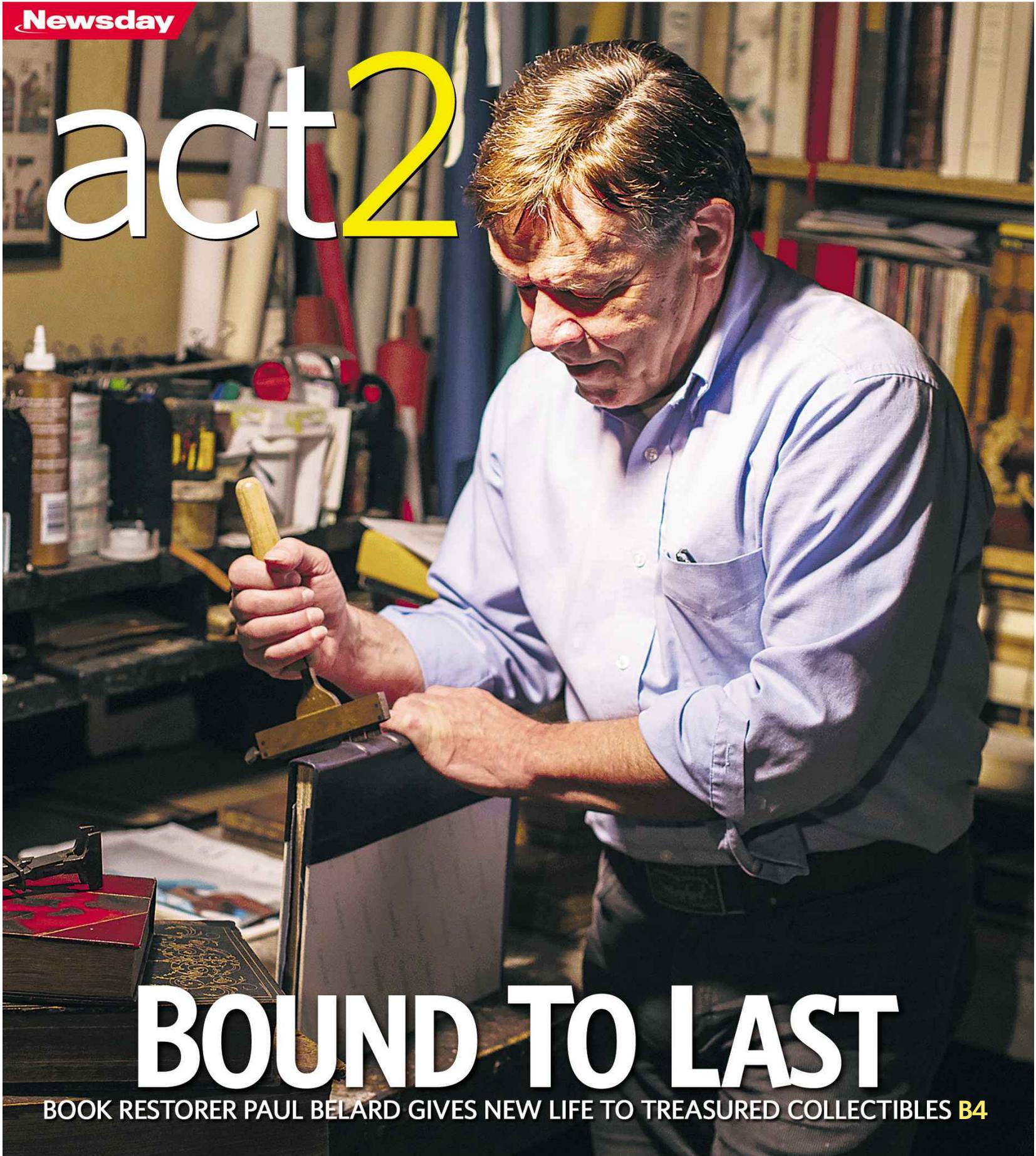


act2



BOUND TO LAST

BOOK RESTORER PAUL BELARD GIVES NEW LIFE TO TREASURED COLLECTIBLES **B4**



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HE'S ONE FOR THE

BY KARIN LIPSON
Special to Newsday

As a boy in his native France, Paul Belard would spend long summer days alone in the mountain pastures of the region where he was born, with only his dog — and some cows and goats he was minding — for company. “It was great,” recalls Belard, a longtime resident of Greenlawn. “It taught me to be patient, to be resourceful” — good traits, no doubt, to bring to his painstaking craft as a bookbinder and restorer.

These days, Belard, 70, a retired mechanical engineer, may find himself almost as alone in his work as he was during those idyllic boyhood summers. In the era of e-books and tablets, “there aren’t too many of us left,” he says, of those who, like him, are dedicated to conserving and repairing works in print that are worn, torn or otherwise marred by the passage of time. Locally, he knows of only “a few in the city and, I think, two on Long Island.”

Whatever the exact number may be, Belard doesn’t seem to lack for projects; these have ranged over the years from rebinding several pages from a Gutenberg Bible (seeing the 15th century printing “brought a tingle to my spine”) to repairing other, less ancient — though perhaps no less cherished — Bibles and cookbooks that serve as “family records,” he says.

His home, filled with richly tooled, leather-bound volumes of all kinds, reflects his life as an avid collector as well as

ON THE COVER

Paul Belard demonstrates the now rare art of book restoration in the workshop of his Greenlawn home. Some of the steps in the process are illustrated in photos above. “Books are my passion,” he says. ■ Video, more photos at newsday.com/act2



JEREMY BALES

STITCH THE PAGES

restorer. “I’ve been collecting books since I was about 14 years old,” says Belard, who is president of the Long Island Book Collectors, an enthusiasts’ organization. “Books are my passion — without books, we’d still be living in caves.”

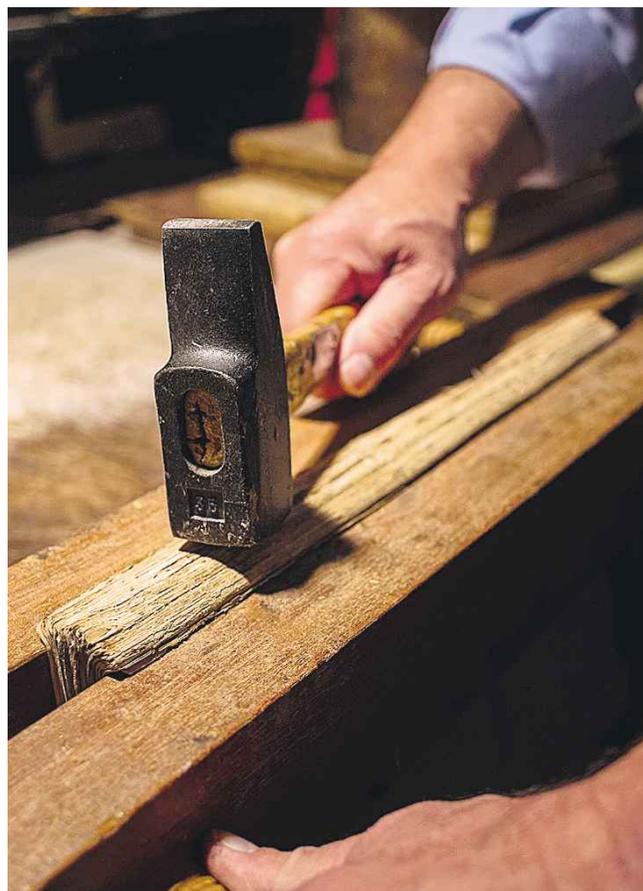
Belard’s dual loves of collecting and repairing books took shape in France, where he was born in a small farming village in the Auvergne region. Though his family moved to Paris when he was 4, he would return to the Auvergne during the summer. (His reminiscences were published in France, in four volumes of memoirs; here, the first volume was self-published in 2010 as “A Summer in Eden.”)

Life as a book collector

started with visits to the Paris flea market as a teenager. He and his younger brother “went to buy books to read them, and then we would resell them,” Belard recalls.

As a young engineer, Belard went to work for the Michelin tire company, developing new machinery and processes. In 1972, while at Michelin, he met his Brooklyn-born wife, Dorothy, several months his junior, who worked for the international company in Lake Success and was in France on business.

“It was the beginning of a trans-Atlantic romance, for a couple of years,” Belard says. They married in 1974 and, after a brief sojourn in this country, settled in Paris. Even in the City of Light, the energetic Belard found himself at loose ends in the evenings. One day, after sending some softcover



JEREMY BALES

SHAPE THE SPINE

books he bought at the flea market to be professionally bound, “I got the idea to bind books myself.”

Soon he was studying with Paule Ameline, a celebrated master bookbinder. For three years, “I would go twice or three times a week at night” to her workshop, Belard recalls. “I loved it. You smell the leather, you smell the paper and you touch it — and you’re alive.”

He also learned how to hand-tool gold lettering for the spines or front covers of books. Yet, for all his early engagement with his craft, he didn’t consider doing it full time.

“I was happy in my profession” as an engineer, Belard

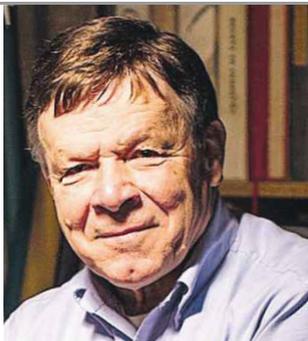
says. “And I don’t think I would have made a living, doing that.”

In 1978, the Belards moved permanently to the United States (their son, Marc, was born here the same year). After working for an engineering consultant firm, he joined the engineering department of New York Telephone in 1989. He retired from what had become Verizon in 2008.

All the while, Belard continued his bookbinding, working initially on his own volumes. In 1979, he got his first client through a Huntington book dealer. Also frequenting the dealer was Bob Brier, a noted Egyptologist who was on the faculty at LIU Post. (Brier later became chairman of the philosophy department and is now a senior research fellow of LIU Post.)

“He said, ‘You know, I have

BOOKS



JEREMY BALES

Collector and restorer
Paul Belard is bound up
in the written word



JEREMY BALES

STRENGTHEN THE SPINE

a couple of books. Let's see what you can do," Belard recalls. "That started my being involved with customers."

Brier says, "I didn't give him my treasures at first." But "everything he did was precise and immaculate, so I knew I was in good hands. . . . With the better books, and the more difficult things to repair, I realized he was an artist."

Belard's work for the Egyptologist has been ongoing: One current project — a large, yellowed volume of maps and engravings titled "Travels in Egypt and Nubia," published in 1757 and needing a new spine — was on hand recently in Belard's basement workshop (beyond the family washer-dryer).

There, Belard keeps the rolls of leather, shelves of marbled paper, a printing press for book titles and other tools of his trade. He also maintains a wooden "sewing frame" for binding books with a needle and thread. "It looks like some instrument of torture," Belard says, as he demonstrates the arduous process of threading together folded sections, or signatures, of paper. These days, though, Belard binds most books using a gluing process. "The glue is flexible and acid-free and it lasts forever," he says. (Details of his work can be viewed at newyorkbookrepair.com)

Though he has revived entire book libraries and conserved rarities like the Gutenberg Bible pages, some of his fondest memories may be reserved for photo albums and scrapbooks created for the



JEREMY BALES

ATTACH THE COVER

family of Reginald Lewis, a financier and industrialist. In 1991, Belard made new bindings for family albums that had been marred in a fire at the Lewis estate in Amagansett. Miraculously, the photographs in the albums remained intact.

"When they came back, they were so beautifully bound," recalls Loida Lewis, who had amassed the family photos that included her husband, Reginald, who died in 1993, and two daughters. "I was so impressed," she says, "that from that time, I sent him all the press releases and archives" to be bound. These days, she says, her grandchildren's artwork and birthday greetings — "everything I would just put in a shoe box" — are sent to Belard for scrapbooking, "because it's then preserved in a beautiful way."

Possessed of a restless mind, Belard has also ventured beyond collecting and repairing books. Earlier this year, after four years of research and writing, he self-published (under the imprint Linden Press) "Vernon Howe Bailey's America," about the life and work of an artist and illustrator who recorded the country's expanding cityscapes in the first half of the 20th century. The profusely illustrated volume



JEREMY BALES

TOOL THE LEATHER

sells for \$80.

There's more: He's now writing two novels, simultaneously, while also working on a history of New York City's development that incorporates vintage prints: "For each chapter, I take etchings or lithographs that illustrate it," he says. "These artists are not that well known

by the general public" — something he hopes to remedy with his book.

And, oh yes, next year he may teach a course on book restoration and protection, as he has before, at LIU Post, "if we get the right number of people."

The collector-restorer-writer-publisher-lecturer says, "I'm never bored. . . . I don't have any problem being retired, because I always find something else to do."