
Blacksmith Artist Forges Bond with Apprentice

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~Judy E. Hamilton, Staff writer

photography: Tyler Evert



Jeff Fetty

SPENCER, W.Va.—Spencer-based designer and blacksmith artist Jeff Fetty describes the creation of an original piece of metalwork as “an intimate and interactive process.”

Watching him work with blacksmith artist Lucas Warner makes the words very meaningful.

Together they lift pieces of metal so heavy they struggle with the weight and then, together, they do a dance with the molten iron from the forge as they heave it onto the anvil, shaping it with hammers and presses, lifting and turning and repeating until they are satisfied with the shape. They are totally in tune with each other as they assemble a giant metal horse they have imaged together.

“These guys weigh about three-quarters of a ton each after they are finished, and there are three of them. It’s really exciting and I haven’t done anything quite like this. I try to push the envelope on every commission and do something different. I’m just over the moon with this new work. I think it’s some of the best work that I’ve ever done,” Fetty said.

And that’s saying something. Fetty has built an international following for his artwork over 42 years. He has created art for famous people around the world, including writers Maya Angelou, Tom Clancy and Homer Hickam; musicians Jon Bon Jovi and Kathy Mattea; fashion designer Yves St. Laurent; as well as the Clinton White House and the Globe Theatre in London.

From apprentice to partner

Part of the reason Fetty regards this project so highly is due to the partnership he has developed over the past year with 25-year-old Lucas Warner, a Tucker County native.

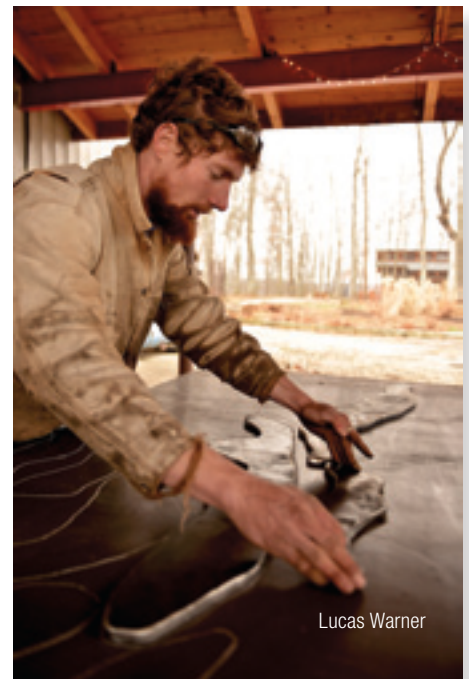
“I can’t say enough about my assistant, Lucas. He is just a superstar, and I have to give him just as much credit as I’m taking on the horse project, or any project,” Fetty said.

The 61-year-old artist helped to raise the young man in more ways than mentoring his art and craft.

“I set up a forge for him when he was 9 years old. His mom, Denise Reese, and I traveled to Egypt together as part of a group study and exchange team with Rotary International. She’s a professor at Davis & Elkins College. We became fast friends and then, when we returned to the States, I became really good friends with her two small children and her husband, John Warner, who is a world-class photographer.

“I started traveling to Mexico very regularly with Lucas’ dad, documenting blacksmiths, craftsmen and artists. We would pull Lucas out of school starting when he was 8 years old and I would home-school him so he didn’t fall behind on his studies,” Fetty said.

Warner was the recipient of a scholarship from the Tamarack Artisan Foundation to study with Fetty through a Rural Business Enterprise Grant, a grant program with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



Lucas Warner

“We’ve been doing this program for four years and we had some left over money for a professional development apprenticeship program. Jeff Fetty has apprenticed other young artists, such as Matt Thomas, Megan Gainer, Paul Meyers and Matt Wallace. He is a true teacher,” said Judy Belcher, CFO and program director of the Tamarack Artisan Foundation.

The apprenticeship that has developed into a partnership is something special to them both.



left:

Lucas and Jeff drawing the horses at full size.

bottom:

Team work!



“I’ve known Jeff most of my life. Our families are close and I’ve sort of grown up around him. His work has influenced my artistic eye. For that reason and other reasons, we finish each other’s sentences. We both have similar eyes and we enjoy working with each other,” Warner said.

This mutual appreciation has worked well for the artistic duo.

“We can just look at each other and make hand signals when we are striking, or a grunt, then I know he’s picking up the right tongs. We are making magic. We have hearing protection, so it’s like being a conductor.

“He’s more than an apprentice: He’s my assistant. He’s my superstar assistant. He’s telling me what to do now.

“One of my favorite sayings is, ‘It’s a poor master that can’t learn from his apprentice.’ And that’s for sure. I know that we learn something from each other every day,” Petty said.

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photography: Jeff Fetty

Warner lives at the Chestnut Ridge Artist Colony in a small cabin on the east ridge near Fetty's blacksmith shop. Fetty's own home is just a stone's throw away.

"I studied engineering and Spanish at Berea College. Being able to visualize things in three dimensions helps a lot, and the drawing skills I learned in some of the classes helped with that.

"The reason I decided to study engineering was because I've always used my hands and built things my whole life. The non-artistic aspects of blacksmithing are the equipment, and knowing the basics of hydraulics is useful to know when something breaks," Warner said.

The apprenticeship has helped the young artist solidify his plans for the future.

"My situation is so lucky. I wouldn't say I fell into it, but I didn't have to search and have a long, difficult journey to get here. I grew up around it. My dad was a nature photographer and I've known Jeff since I was little. This is so deep-rooted and part of my life, it wasn't intentional. But, looking back, every turn of my life was headed this direction," Warner said of his path to an artistic career.



To other young artists he offered advice. “Try to look ahead and always be on the lookout for that little thing that sparks your interest and makes you turn your head. Pay attention to it because it may be speaking to something you don’t have immediate access to, in the everyday jumble of life,” Warner said.

Trio of horses sculpture

Michael Staenberg, president of The Staenberg Group and co-founder of THF Realty, has commissioned Fetty three times for artwork.

The first commission has become a landmark in Charleston—the Trace Fork Sculpture Garden—at the intersection of RHL Boulevard and U.S. Route 119. The arrangement of metal flowers ranging in height from six to 10 feet was commissioned in 2003.

The second commission was a project in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

The current commission is the recently completed trio of horses sculpture for the Old Mill Shopping Center in Washington, Pennsylvania.

“Jeff Fetty is a great guy. He makes art come to life. He did a great job with this, as he has on the other projects. We have a ‘Field and Stream’ concept at the Old Mill and we thought horses would be a great focal point for the center,” Staenberg said of the new destination retail development site.

Fetty and Warner share an enthusiasm for the project that has taken them about three months to complete.

“I was invited to submit some designs for a new shopping center and knew the client liked horses. I just started playing around with some sketches and drawing,” Fetty said.

Then he and Warner started playing around with small pieces of metal.

“In the development stage, we had no idea how we were going to make the horses. No idea at all. One of the things I like about the project is where the shapes for the project came from,” Warner said.

“Two years ago, Jeff did a decorative lighting project where he made these posts out of old pipe and, with the torch, cut these shapes for the light to come out, and there were these really cool shapes, hundreds of them. He couldn’t throw them away because they were just too cool.



“He threw them in a tumbler we use to clean our work for the final finish. We pulled them out and the edges were all rounded over, and when we were brainstorming on this project, we started playing around with these shapes.”

The two artists arranged the pieces into the shapes of horses. They then projected the image with an overhead projector to enlarge it to the size they desired for the shopping center horse project sculptures.

Staenberg appreciates Fetty’s efforts. “I think art has a place in economic development. Art is a subtle thing. The people coming to the shopping center notice the little things,” he said.

The blacksmithing tradition

Fetty’s artistic journey with blacksmithing has been a joyous one.

“My girlfriend’s father, who became my father-in-law, was a farrier but he was

***“The more you share, the more you’ll get back in return,
as long as you are giving in the right spirit.”***

~Jeff Fetty

“You know, I’ve been doing this for 40 years—actually 42 years—and I guess that makes me old but I still feel young,” Fetty said. “I go to work every day and work hard. With every project I approach, every major commission, I really try to do something that pushes the envelope, not only artistically, but I have a large, well-equipped studio here and I like to test not only my physical endurance but also my space here.

“I have big hammers, big presses, big forges and big ideas. I just love heating up these really big pieces of metal. It’s all that three of us can do to bring out one of these pieces to the forge.”

also a blacksmith. He didn’t do artistic blacksmithing. What he did was horseshoes and farm-type blacksmithing. But when I saw it, I immediately fell in love with it and knew it was my destiny.

“I said to myself, ‘I have to figure out how to spend the rest of my life doing this.’ And I did. So after a few dates and hanging out with her father in the blacksmith shop, I realized I needed to marry this girl. And I did. So, 40 years later, with grandkids running around, she still likes me and I still like her. It’s good,” Fetty said.

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The artist hasn't taken his good fortune for granted. It's something for which he expresses daily gratitude.

"Every day I try to remember to say to myself, 'I'm still getting away with it.' I live in a beautiful place. It's great. I'm in my hometown. Every time I leave the country for a month or whatever—I could do this anywhere I wanted to—I've been all over the U.S. and I've done my share of world traveling. I could work anywhere, but I want to work in Spencer, West Virginia. I love the people. I love the scenery. I love the trails. It's the best," Fetty said.

So, with a grateful heart, he continues the work he loves, in the place he loves, as he passes his knowledge, skills and artistic eye on to others—especially, his new assistant.

"Lucas is like my son. In fact, when he was little, his parents asked if I'd be his legal guardian if something happened to them. And it looks like I got the better end of that deal because it looks like he's going to end up taking care of me," Fetty said with a laugh.

For additional information about Jeff Fetty, visit www.jefffetty.com.

To view a video made by Lucas Warner showing him and Fetty working on creating the first horse in "Fly Press Workout," visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpQMyhJvEXY, or use the QR:



To view a video on the "Old Mill Horse Install," visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXkAFTF_TOs&feature=youtu.be, or use the QR:





facing page:

Console Table
Jeff Fetty

30" x 60" x 22"
forged steel with hot brass brush highlights

this page:

Tree of Life Sculpture
Jeff Fetty

32" x 26" x 2" deep
forged steel with hot brass brush highlights