

Spencer blacksmith Jeff Fetty forges art, commerce



Kenny Kemp

Sparks fly as Spencer blacksmith Jeff Fetty pounds a piece of hot steel in his shop on a scenic ridge in Roane County.

By Sara Busse

SPENCER, W.Va. -- His heart is as soft as the steel he bends is hard. And his personality is as fiery as the forge he tends. is as fiery as the forge he tends.

Artist-blacksmith Jeff Fetty is at once quiet and contemplative, and boisterously excited. On a recent visit to his workshop atop Chestnut Ridge in Roane County, he bounced from one spot to another in his warehouselike studio/forge, touching finished pieces, adjusting the music blasting from hidden speakers, fiddling with his computer, stoking the fire.

But when he's hammering a piece of molten steel, he's laser-focused. He squints through the heat as sparks fly from the hammer in his muscled hands.

Those hands show scars from the many years of his work -- smashed fingers, cuts and, of course, burns.

It all started with his future wife, Charlotte. He was supposed to be picking her up to go out on a date, but he stood near her house, mesmerized by the blacksmith who worked next door.

"The smell of the coal fire, the glow of the embers, the sound of the hammer. I couldn't walk away," he said. He joked that when he realized the farrier was Charlotte's father, Jack Hopkins, he knew he would have to marry Charlotte to be able to be near the blacksmith.

Yet he's come a long way from the horseshoes and tools made by his late father-in-law.

A recent staircase/railing project was a \$45,000 job, while other projects have come in at six figures. He tells of a trip to New York City, and the juxtaposition of sleeping in his van one day and dining in a posh restaurant with a client, a well-known corporate executive, the next.

Fetty is the best combination of artist and businessman. His products are exquisite, yet he takes the time to market them to his clients.

"You have to be a salesman," he said, holding a piece of decorative steel tightly in his arms to warm it with his body heat. "I would never hand a client a cold piece of steel. I warm it up before I let them touch it." In each presentation, he shows potential clients the raw materials, and the processes and tools needed to turn the hard, straight steel into a fine work of art.

Fetty's been hammering away for 40 years, and has traveled to conferences in France, the Czech Republic, Italy, Germany and across the United States. He's taught many young blacksmiths in his studio as well as at various teaching demonstrations. He's been recognized in magazines, but mostly he's been able to make a good living plying his craft.

"When I saw a great demand for my work, I took some time off to study the business end of it all. I have to know that part to be able to preserve my dream that I'm passionate about, of forging hot metal. I never thought that I would be an employer," he said.

While his small pieces are available at Tamarack, it's the larger, commissioned works that pay the bills. His résumé is impressive: He's done pieces for President Bill Clinton's White House, the Elizabethan Globe Theatre in London, designer Yves Saint Laurent in Paris, American writer Tom Clancy, rocker Jon Bon Jovi, and for buildings and homes in Shanghai; Paris; Boston; Peterborough, England; and Vienna, Austria.

Locally, his work can be seen at the Governor's Mansion, in front of CAMC Women and Children's Hospital (the popular large daffodils) and at the state Department of Natural Resources building.

And Fetty was honored last week as one of the world's seven premier metal designers by "Metal Design International 2012."

He scoffs at the celebrity connections. He's just as proud of the delicate daffodils and candlesticks he sells at Tamarack.

"I'm designing for my age now," he said, when asked if his 58-year-old body is feeling the strains of the trade. While he does all of the design and the intricate work that is his trademark, he creates works that others in his studio can help him to complete.

'My life is my work'

Fetty is building a one-bedroom, one-story home next to his workshop. His old workshop was next to his house, and he realized that when he built his dream studio high atop the mountain ridge, he was spending more and more time away from that home. Colorful Adirondack chairs sit in a row outside the workshop, overlooking the town of Spencer, where Fetty grew up. He points to the hospital where his wife works as a nurse. He can see where they dated, where they lived.

"My life is my work, my work is my life," he said.

Fetty is emotional when he talks of his wife, his two sons and his grandchildren. His pride is evident as he tells stories of his sons' accomplishments.

"Charlotte and I have been married for 39 years this year -- we were married at 19. I barely finished high school. And look at my sons," he said, with a catch in his voice.

Jacob, 33, was a professional cyclist, and he's ridden with Lance Armstrong and other pros all over the world. He now works for the city of Spencer in community development. Nathan, 35, is a lawyer in Buckhannon and will be teaching at the West Virginia University College of Law this fall.

A voracious reader, Fetty has written many articles for blacksmith magazines. He loves photography as well.

Fetty has taken many pilgrimages to Mexico to observe and to work with local blacksmiths. He's asked that, upon his death, a portion of his ashes be scattered there. "It's a place where I truly feel at home. The men there say that my work is superior to theirs, but they are making tools that are sustaining the farming community. Their work is so important." In his workshop, Fetty has a large display of tools found on his Mexican journeys.

In 2008, Fetty started Chestnut Ridge Artists Colony, and he is working tirelessly to bring other artists to the top of the mountain. His shop has been located there for almost four years, and Holcomb Woodworking and TLH Jewelry are on site as well. A vineyard and winery are being built, and the city is working to establish walking/hiking trails in the area.

The blacksmith shop

Fetty employs five people, including the Kim Fox. He calls her the den mother, as she does everything from cooking the gourmet meal served to dignitaries at a recent news

conference, to power-washing the side of the building, to mulching the flowerbeds, to sanding and grinding pieces of art.

Tools are on racks, including ones made from used NASCAR axles, a popular trick among modern-day blacksmiths.

"That steel is as hard as it gets," he said.

In the shop, a 3,000-pound 1937 Chambersburg pneumatic hammer sends out an ear-shattering ring as the tool hits the large metal plate, slamming the piece of hot steel between the two huge pieces of metal, drawing out its length. There are welders, drill presses, hammers and anvils, and a fork truck that carries steel stock that's stored neatly around the cavernous building. The centerpiece, a coal-fueled forge, has a large vent Fetty crafted, and an electric fan below the coals makes the fire surge when it's turned on.

Nearby, a fluffy cat eats from a forged bowl atop a large anvil.

On sawhorses near the front door, a 200 million-year-old slab of petrified wood from Oregon awaits Fetty's artful hands to make it into a piece of furniture for sale in a shop at The Greenbrier or at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Hanging on the two-story walls of the shop are samples of fences.

"If I walk in with a hunk of fence, it shows its honest integrity. It's a great sales tool, and it helps me if I make a sample for the pricing of the job. I'm an artist before I'm a businessman, but it's all about going the extra mile."

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