

Twisting hot iron teaches patience

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There is a ritual and subtle rhythm to Michael Murphy's every movement as a blacksmith — in his 1800s style workspace at the Tallahassee Museum, he dances between the anvil and the bellows with tongs and red-hot iron in hand. The anvil is the large saddle-like structure where he bangs and bashes creations into being, while the bellows fan the flames of a coal-fueled fireplace that can burn at temperatures from 1800 to 2000 degrees.

While the term blacksmith may conjure up medieval images of soot-covered workers and their blunt instruments or farriers shoeing horses, Murphy confidently dispels these misconceptions with his demonstrations and workshops at the Tallahassee Museum. Suited up in his steel-toed work boots and polycarbonate lenses, he aims to educate visitors and students alike about a craft over thousands of years in the making and is looking forward to his upcoming Beginning Blacksmith Workshop on Saturday, May 27.

"When you think blacksmith, don't think horseshoes, think hardware store," Murphy said. "Blacksmithing as a whole is more tool making than anything else, and the tools and the techniques have been evolving. In Europe, in the 14th and 15th centuries there were a lot of specialized blacksmiths, but when we began colonizing this country, blacksmiths became generalists."

In fact, Murphy says blacksmiths make more nails than anything else. In his own repertoire, he's crafted everything from tomahawks to tongs, including his own tools. Murphy's interest in blacksmithing began when he wanted to start making his own wood-working tools. As an army intelligence analyst stationed in Tacoma, Washington, he attended a workshop that led him to join the Northwest Blacksmith Association. After retiring from the U.S. Army, he joined the Florida Artist Blacksmith Association and has been teaching, demonstrating, and making ever since.

Twisting a white-hot piece of iron into an oyster shucker, he says he considers himself a craftsman rather than an artist, and that much of blacksmithing involves a good amount of general knowledge in geometry and physics. In terms of style, he focuses on detail work and adheres to his first teacher, Darryl Nelson's, wise words concerning leaving your signature on a piece.

"Darryl up in Washington would have people say they wanted things to look hand forged with hammer marks,"



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Michael Murphy will give a blacksmithing workshop at the Tallahassee Museum on Saturday.

explains Murphy. "And he would always say, 'a good smith doesn't leave hammer marks.'"

Murphy says his career as a computer programmer and tech support for the Florida Department of Labor and the Department of Agriculture serves him well as he pre-designs his ideas in graphics programs. Many of his materials are re-purposed — he forged his own primitive-looking knife out of a pick-up truck coil spring, a dead branch off a live oak tree in his backyard, and a few inches of quarter-inch copper from a lightning rod he salvaged.

Hanging in his shop are various tools that were once jackhammers, railroad clips, wagon wheels, and more. He's made tiny swords out of duplex nails, bottle openers for bartenders, a rose out of roofing tin, and bookmarks in the shapes of leaves. Murphy isn't confined to the 19th century in his own home shop, and uses power tools like a mod-



ern-day blacksmith, though he takes satisfaction in using his own physicality and force versus electricity.

"There's an attitude that I've picked up as a blacksmith: if it's broke, don't replace it, fix it," says Murphy with a waggish grin as he finishes his motto, "And a blacksmith can fix almost anything but a broken heart."

For his Beginning Blacksmithing Workshop, Murphy relays the ins and outs and history of the craft as well as insights he's learned from his own influential teachers such as Skeeter Prather, Ray Klontz and Jerry Grice. He teaches students the five basic

If you go

What: Beginning Blacksmith Workshop
When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday, May 27
Where: Tallahassee Museum, 3945 Museum Drive
Cost: \$200 (members), \$250 (nonmembers)
Contact: For more information, call 850-575-8684 or visit http://tallahasseeuseum.org/event/beginning-blacksmith-workshop-5/?instance_id=1533.

blacksmithing techniques — drawing out, upsetting, cutting, bending and welding — as well as the background on the equipment.

He typically starts students out making their own punch and chisel, which they will in turn use to make a set of tongs that can hold onto the hot metals. From there, Murphy guides them in designing and shaping whatever they choose to do with their iron. Classes are kept small to provide hands-on attention, and many of his past attendees have gone on to continue blacksmithing as hobbyists.

"I love teaching and seeing the expression on somebody's face that goes 'oh, that's how it works,'" says Murphy. "Mostly, I get out here and debunk some of the myths, show them what it's really like, make a few nails, tell a few jokes, and give a few lectures."

In a world of instant gratification, Murphy says blacksmithing teaches many lessons including patience. As scales of iron oxide shatter off the metal he's shaped into a key ring at his every swing, he notes that many observers and students alike don't realize the amount of repetition a blacksmith goes through to achieve their final product until they see and experience it.

"It's really a long, drawn out process," says Murphy. "The forging process takes only 20 percent of your time, and the rest of it is all filing, grinding, and polishing."

It's these hidden stages that Murphy continually unveils in his work at the museum and around the country at various reenactments and festivals. Moving about the shop with an ease and confidence, he hopes his students will transfer these skills into other aspects of their lives.

"Regardless of what it is, take pride in what you do," states Murphy. "If you're going to do something, do it well."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).