

Form & Function

Written by Pamela Martin Ovens
Wednesday, 12 November 2008 07:02

Blacksmith **Kevin Lawless** transforms ordinary hunks of metal into beautiful works of art.

I've known Kevin Lawless for years, and he's always been shy about his accomplishments. It is my great pleasure to share his story with you, and, especially, to call him my friend. Kevin, the artist, is every bit as interesting and surprising as his work.



Kevin Lawless is a blacksmith. He takes ordinary pieces of metal and transforms them into amazing works of art. His work is form and function personified.

I met with Kevin for this interview at his Greens Road studio on Hilton Head Island. When I walked in, Kevin was creating the sides of a “wagon of sorts” that would sit atop a semi trailer for Robert Graves. (Robert says he needed a strong carrier to transport three buffalo from Asheville to Bluffton.) As Kevin cut a piece of steel, sparks flew off the wheel like the most beautiful, but frightening, fireworks I had ever seen. This work is filled with danger.

Kevin Lawless grew up in Illinois on a farm of about 5,400 acres – just a little bigger than Dausfuskie Island. His mother's family were artists, including his aunt and maternal grandmother, who were painters. His grandmother had a master's degree in teaching. She taught school until she married and then had to quit because teachers were supposed to be Miss, not Mrs. To this day, Kevin loves teaching, so this made him sad. Kevin's grandfather was the President of Kidde Corporation, the world's largest manufacturer of fire safety products. He invented a clock that recorded the time of day when a flashlight was pointed in its direction – something used to keep night watchmen on their toes. The family was friends with Auggie Busch, and Kevin's grandfather helped Auggie make carbonated sodas to sell during prohibition. His father was a carpenter who fostered Kevin's interest in working with his hands.



After completing high school, Kevin, who admits to being dyslexic, did not have a lot of self esteem and joined the Navy. He was accepted as a Navy Seal and for five years worked in Vietnam and Cambodia, specializing in Intelligence. He says his walk through the ‘killing fields’ was an awakening experience. He went home with a Purple Heart that Kevin says they were just “giving out.” I don't believe it for a minute.

Kevin graduated from a local community college, then went on to the University of Illinois, earning a Bachelor's degree. He spent time working in Chicago but left because the winters were too cold and it was the one time in his life that he felt bored in his work. (He was with an accounting firm at the time.) A move to Hilton Head Island solved both problems.

Kevin met his wife, Sherry, while playing rugby with her brother on the Hilton Head Island team. They chatted on the sidelines and the rest is history.



Kevin credits Sherry with his biggest achievements – one of them, getting a Master's in Fine Art from the Savannah College of Art and Design. Sherry supported him all the way, encouraging him to succeed. No stranger to higher education herself, Sherry has a B.A. from Georgetown

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University and a Master's from Columbia. She's employed by the University of Georgia and is currently working on her Doctorate.

Journalist Charles Kuralt was someone Kevin had always admired, and when he watched Kuralt interview Philip Simmons, he knew he had to meet Simmons. In 1982, Simmons had received the National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, the highest honor the United States can bestow on a traditional artist. Pieces of his ornamental iron can be seen all over the City of Charleston, in wrought iron gates, fences, balconies and window grills. All his pieces were created by hand. Kevin Lawless, a student at SCAD at the time, was determined to learn from this master. He ended up interning with Simmons in his studio.

Kevin calls Philip Simmons a true blacksmith, describing his work, done in a metal building in downtown Charleston, as 'low tech.' According to Kevin, Simmons had a coal forge, an oven that bakes metal, and he made everything from scratch, hammering all the metal by hand. At the age of 96, Philip Simmons is still an inspiration to Kevin Lawless.

But the art of blacksmithing has evolved since his interning days, and Kevin uses the latest equipment. He uses a propane forge and has equipment that hammers the metal, although he does hand work, as well. Kevin's anvils, hammers, benders and rollers are quite beautiful as well as functional. He has over 150 hammers, including one made of copper, all with different uses.

Kevin Lawless donates artwork to numerous local charities. He is especially fond of those for children. He's locally famous for his items given to the Evening of the Arts, an event whose proceeds go to the Artist in Residence programs in all the island and Bluffton schools. The Evening of the Arts auctioned off a bed adorned with lots of metal palm fronds... and a local teacher wearing a negligee.



When our fire department was having trouble getting people off the beach and golf courses during emergencies, Kevin designed and built a set of wheels for the firemen's gurney. A friend needed a barbecue, so Kevin designed one. Now he sometimes makes barbecues in the shape of pigs. These items are just a small part of his work, which includes gates, fences, garden art, balcony rails, tables and much more.

Forging metal is a dangerous undertaking. When working on a cement surface, the heat can take enough moisture out of the concrete that it spontaneously combusts. Kevin admits to being a bit of a pyromaniac. He says he might have chosen glass blowing if it weren't for his asthma.

Kevin describes being an intuitive artist, which means "enjoying the process of the art." He says that making the piece is the art form. When you finish creating the piece, you have an artifact. The act of watching Kevin create the piece is a joy.



Kevin quotes his friend, illustrator Ben Morris, who said, "you can have art for your pocket or art for your head." Kevin Lawless is fortunate to have both.

If you can't find Kevin Lawless at his studio on Greens Road, you might find him roasting a pig for co-workers or friends, or in a little local winery on the island making his own wine. Whatever you do, look him up. Your life will be richer for it.

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