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Blacksmiths share craft at annual Hammer-In

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Kentucky Forge Council member John Zeh works on a Frederick's Cross

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Visitors to the Kentucky Museum on Saturday were met with a chorus of clanking anvils and the smell of superheated steel.

Those metallic phenomena are hallmarks of the annual Hammer-In event. Organized by the Kentucky Forge Council and now in its sixth year, the celebration of blacksmithing brings artisans from across the state to share their craft with the public.

Travis Hutchins, a member of the KFC since 2017, said the council has about 30 members who meet monthly.

He said that the blade-based TV show “Forged in Fire” is partially responsible for a resurgence in blacksmithing over the past decade, with folks interested in creating their own knives and swords.

Hutchins, who creates utilitarian items like spoons, skewers and bottle openers, said the act of creation is a big draw to the trade’s practitioners.

“It’s the mental challenge of taking a flat bar of steel and making it do what you want it to do, and turning it into something that you want,” Hutchins said.

John Zeh, a metallurgist engineer for over 20 years, spent the day turning tiny rectangular bars of steel into Frederick’s Crosses – tiny crucifixes with a hole in the center – for onlookers.

“The risk is taking it out before it’s hot and trying to make something out of it,” Zeh said while the silver material turned bright orange inside of his forge. “Just got to be patient.”

He said blacksmithing is a “good hobby” for him. It just “takes awhile to build up the tools.”

Zeh shared his booth with Cassie and Daniel Nagel, who showed visitors how to turn a series of steel discs into a metal rose. The couple shared they had made more than a hundred of the flowers for their wedding this year.

Daniel Nagel, also a metallurgist, first got into the hobby during his time at the South Dakota School of Mines.

“Everything I learned in school I can apply to it – why you have to heat it up a certain way, why you have to hit it this way, what the chemistry does,” Daniel Nagel said.

Cassie Nagel said that it’s satisfying to watch a lump of metal slowly turn into a rose or a cross.

KFC member Jeff Barber was drawn more to the world of blades, showing off a sample of his ornate knives to the public.

Barber started creating knives about a year and a half ago during a period of poor health.

“I wanted to give my friends and family one, something to remember me by,” Barber said. “I didn’t think I would still be here.”

Thirty sharp gifts to loved ones later and Barber continues to work on his craft, grinding and heat-treating stock sheets of steel and attaching them to intricate wooden handles.

Hutchins said that there’s two different skill sets in blacksmithing – those who mold metals to their will, and those who work with pre-cut materials, like Barber.

“It’s definitely two different sides of a coin,” Hutchins said. “You use the same tools, you use the same heat, sometimes you even use the same metals.”

Hutchins has worked his craft for about five years, and he still keeps the very first Frederick’s Cross he ever made with him in his pocket.

He said that learning something new every day is what keeps him coming back to the forge.

It also helps that the list of things a blacksmith can create is almost without end – Hutchins joked that his wife has an entire Pinterest board full of potential metal designs.

“I’ve got enough projects to last me for the next several years if I really want to look into it,” he said.

Whether it's forged jewelry, coat hooks, door knockers or swords, "you can go any route."

"It depends on where you want to go and what side of the rabbit hole you want to go down," Hutchins said. He added that it's nice to know there's a market for items made by one's own hand.

"There's always going to be a need for someone to make something out of metal," Daniel Nagel said.