

nod to the little guy



PHOTO BY ELOIT GRAMER

Metalsmith Steve Shepherd runs a forge in Sharpsburg where he creates decorative and functional items that are shipped all over the country.

The Mettle to Start Over

Former lobbyist Steve Shepherd cools down with hot metal

It takes courage to walk away from a successful career to fulfill a lifelong dream. Steve Shepherd had the courage to start his life over when he left his career as a lobbyist in Washington, D.C., to go back to his first love, blacksmithing. Quite a different turn from the world of politics, but Shepherd says it's far more gratifying to indulge his creative side, not to mention to be his own boss.

With that attitude in mind, the 36-year-old began his own blacksmithing business,

Gilgamesh Forge, in 1999. Shepherd has lived in various places around the world, including Texas, Saudi Arabia and England, but Pittsburgh has been his home "off and on" since he was in ninth grade.

Shepherd became interested in blacksmithing while in college (where he majored in political science). He enjoyed working with wood until he joined a blacksmith guild and realized his true passion was working in metals. A college friend nicknamed him "Gilgamesh" after the Mesopotamian king who lived around 2700 B.C. Coincidentally—or perhaps not—the Mesopotamians were first to work in metal.

Most of the time you can find him in his Sharpsburg shop forging pieces of metal to create works of art while listening to what he calls "good forging music," such as Miles Davis, Led Zeppelin and The Who.

Shepherd's work is well-known throughout the mid-Atlantic region, but people from around the country have called on him to create original pieces for their homes or offices. "If you can envision it, we can build it," says Shepherd, adding with a smile that there may be a few restrictions: "If you need a nuclear submarine or space shuttle or something, we might be able to make it, but it probably wouldn't work, and would most likely be very dangerous."

But, weird ideas are welcome, says Shepherd. One curious creation was a crematory urn in the shape of a bone for the ashes of a customer's dog. More common items—but each made by hand, one at a time—include iron fences and gates, stair rails, chandeliers and wine racks. His work is designed to customers' specifications, from neoclassical to French provincial to postmodern.

Shepherd's flexible hours allow him time with his wife and two children, as well as time for Steelers football games. Gilgamesh Forge is located on the grounds of the old Fort Pitt Brewery in Sharpsburg. 412/965-6940, gilgameshforge.com. — Maggi Normile

Regularly in Scoop, we give a "Nod to the Little Guy" as a way to show appreciation for owners of small businesses—the folks who bring color and character to this region. If you know a "one-man" shop with a unique story, let us know. E-mail Lori Riley at lriley@wqed.org; type "Nod to the Little Guy" in the subject line.