



FROM THE GALLERY—*Suzanne Waring*

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ED CAFFREY

Bladesmith

The flash of dazzling yellow light, extreme heat, and deafening roar erupt as tongues of flame leap from the opening of the forge. In spite of the flame’s intensity, Ed Caffrey, wearing protective gear, carefully removes the glowing hot damascus from the forge and carries it with tongs over to the anvil to hand forge it. This hand-forging process is just one of the beginning steps to producing a handcrafted knife.



Courtesy Ed Caffrey



Vaughn Camp and Sheath

Courtesy Ed Caffrey



Courtesy Ed Caffrey



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That disappointment stuck with him through the years he was in the Air Force. In 1988, taking advantage of being stationed in Arkansas, which is located right in the heart of knife-making country, he attended several "hammer-ins" — which are knife-making rallies — where he began learning from others who were smitten with the love of making knives. Catching the knife-making fever, he was able to practice after he built a small shop on the lot of his rental home. One day a man came into the shop, watched while Caffrey was making a small hunting knife, and offered him \$40 for it. That day was the turning point. When he realized he could sell what he enjoyed making, he knew he wanted to make knives for a living.

Then the Air Force sent Caffrey to Great Falls where he bought a home with a lot that had the space for building a forging shop. When he retired in 2003, he was prepared to go into the knife-making business full time.

Experience has shown Caffrey that 60 percent of his customers are users and 40 percent are collectors. He makes superior performing knives for both groups. The time it takes to make a Caffrey knife from bar stock varies from 20 hours for a basic hunting knife to 200 hours for a highly embellished collector-grade knife.

He has taken lessons and taught himself to make the mosaic damascus knife, which is sought after by collectors. Twisting and pounding several different kinds of steel together not only makes the final product beautiful to behold but also creates a blade that is as good or, in some cases, better than the base materials. The design is made visible by an etching process using ferric chloride. Patterns can range from random to the bladesmith's creating several layers that may be combined to produce mosaic damascus. With the mosaic process, it is possible to produce realistic images and even names or letters within the steel. Through experimentation, Caffrey has also been successful in making colored mosaic damascus knives. He does this with an additional process of baking lacquers and heat coloring, or a combination of both.

Caffrey, who holds American Bladesmith Society certification as a mastersmith, knows that he can't hide in his shop

and make knives; he has to market his knife-making skills. Building a yearly schedule around the various aspects of his business, he spends most of his time making knives that have already been ordered, usually via the web, but he also sets aside time to make knives for display and sale at five annual shows, such as the Blade Show and International Cutlery Fair in Atlanta each year in May. "If I didn't rotate, I would never have time to make knives for the shows or for my website," said Caffrey.

In 2008, his artistic skills were honored when he was nominated for and inducted into the Montana Circle of American Masters in Visual Folk and Traditional Arts. As a member of this group, he was sponsored by the Montana Arts Council and the Montana World Trade Center to attend and to exhibit in "Kentucky Crafted: The Market," the nation's original wholesale/retail show for handcrafted products held each February in Louisville, Kentucky.

Using his experiences from teaching at hammer-ins, Ed also schedules time to teach knife-making skills in three different courses: Basic Bladesmithing, Advanced Bladesmithing, and Mosaic Damascus Bladesmithing in his shop. Knife-making enthusiasts have come from Australia, Germany, and many points in the United States to take a one-week course. However, some knife-making enthusiasts would never have the opportunity for this one-on-one instruction, so Ed has put these three different courses on videotape so they can be purchased.

Many who want to own their own business would say that Caffrey is one lucky guy. But luck is not the right word to describe Caffrey as an entrepreneur. He spent hours developing himself into a finely skilled craftsman and artisan, and then with those skills he created side products that were "value added." Because of this ingenuity, he can make a living at what he enjoys most — all aspects of making knives. **AM**

Ed can be reached through his website at www.caffreyknives.net or by calling him at (406) 727-9102.



~A life-long interest in communications made Suzanne Waring first a college instructor and then a writer. She lives in Great Falls and writes about Montana people and their communities.



Ed forging at press.

Courtesy Ed Caffrey