Dr. Jim Wells helps Terri Shuck wrap a piece of hot iron around a scrolling jig during a decorative ironwork class offered by New River Community and Technical College.

**From Anatomy to Ironwork: Dr. Jim Wells is Forging a Second Teaching Career at New River CTC**

[Lewisburg, WV] Doctor – Artist – Mentor – Teacher: Dr. Jim Wells fits into all these categories, but his favorite is teacher. He has led students through the jungle researching primates and now leads a new group to the forge and into the world of decorative ironwork at New River Community and Technical College.

Wells earned his doctorate in Physical Anthropology and spent 35 years studying the behavior, anatomy and biomechanics of monkeys, apes and man, leading research trips and teaching Anatomy at the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine until his retirement. He
also taught courses at Bluefield State College and New River Community and Technical College.

So how does one make the jump from anatomy to ironwork? “It’s a quick easy trip,” muses Wells, explaining that in anatomy, he has spent 35 years studying the physics of motion in primates, the structures and functions of the muscular systems and why they’re there. “You have to have an artistic outlet if you do anything intellectual like research,” he states. For him, the logical choice was to start in wood.

Obsessed with large and over-scale tools and objects, Wells began making king size beds with giant tools, using tree trunks and chestnut split rail fence. As his projects became more elaborate, he began adding ironwork pieces such as scrolls and vines. Little by little, woodworking became less and less interesting, and the iron was more challenging and more interesting.

He has worked with several mentors in his years of ironwork, noting that his biggest influence is Jeff Fetty of Spencer, WV. Fetty is an internationally known metal worker and “very, very good,” according to Wells.

Best known for his calla lilies, which feature the glasswork of David Osborne, Wells finds his inspiration in nature, in the field and in his dreams. His works include grapevine wine-racks, scrolled oak leaf wall hangings and a winged dragon that will soon be sent to a shop at The Greenbrier. This year, Wells decided to share his love of ironwork and partnered with the New River Community and Technical College Greenbrier Valley Campus to offer a series of workshops in decorative ironwork.

“The students are excited,” states Wells as he discusses the direction of the courses. Offering beginner, intermediate and “organic” levels, students are taught how a forge works, basic tools and techniques for working with iron and, in the end, have a piece that they designed and made to take home with them.

“Imagination helps a blacksmith,” Wells points out. He says that a person needs to be able to create things that are pleasing to the eye and emotionally pleasing as well, getting each part as close to perfect as possible. That’s exactly what he tries to teach his students, how to “see it.”

The intermediate course will delve further into technique and practice, while the “organic” class will build a railing featuring all organic elements.

The response to the class has been quite overwhelming. Because of the size of the studio, and only having three forges, Wells limited the class size to eight students. There is now a waiting list for the second beginners session scheduled for this fall.
“I was one of the lucky ones who got in first,” says Jim Chatfield who learned of the class from a friend. “I said, ‘yeah, sure, I’d love to do that.’”

Chatfield has always been interested in blacksmithing, as has fellow student John Gallimore, a machinist by trade. Gallimore, who first encountered the craft at Colonial Williamsburg, enjoys forge work because you can do things that can’t be done any other way. He likes doing things the old way.

In the eight sessions, the students have learned drawing out, up-setting, twists, scrolls and collaring. “What I wanted them to do for their project,” Wells explains, “was to show that they could do all the techniques.”

“Jim’s great,” says Terri Shuck, one of three females taking the class. “He’s so good. His work is incredible – the detail he does is incredible,” she declares as she builds the fire in the forge. Shuck has dabbled in art for years and thought, “this would be interesting,” when she read the article about the class. Her husband, a carpenter, built her a forge at home, so they can mix wood and metal. Her sons are also enjoying it.

Laughing as they discuss their pieces and their failures before getting down to work, Wells proclaims, “You can’t talk while you’re blacksmithing – that’s how things get burnt up,” admitting that he himself has burned a piece or two.

For information on upcoming ironwork offerings at New River, or to be added to the waiting list for the next session, contact (304) 872-4520 or (304) 647-6570.

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