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Goldsmith apprentices learn 3,000-year-old craft under close watch of master

By Pippa Fisher



Apprentice Julia Tennenbaum, right, demonstrates technique to newest apprentice Lauren Herrington. Photos Pippa Fisher

son, she explains that Ware has no ego. She says that sometimes customers come into the store and treat her like a salesperson, demanding to talk to the craftsman, but she says Ware always validates her, explaining to the customer that she is a goldsmith.

Tennenbaum came to this apprenticeship from another traditionally male-dominated field of blacksmithing, which she had to give up following a back injury in a surfing accident.

Ware says his requirements for a potential apprentice is artistic ability. He asks that they bring an example of their artistic work. Tennenbaum recalls she brought a pauldron - the shoulder section of a suit of armor - as her audition piece.

"They must be artists with passion. No mechanics," says Ware.

Lauren Herrington is Ware's most recent recruit. She joined in January, having worked as a cobbler.

Melissa Fuhriman, a graduate of the now-closed Revere Academy in San Francisco, has been with Ware for two years, although she left for a while and now works in Ware's other store in Walnut Creek.

Azeeta Nikoui, a professional singer by night, who was previously making jewelry with wire and stones to sell on Etsy has been with Ware for almost two years.

Ware explains the apprentices are learning all the aspects of the job, from the craft itself to customer service and how to run a business. And they all pitch in, he says. "For example, Lauren is outstanding at advertising on social media, which I have no interest in," he notes.

Ware reflects on his career and the many years he spent in apprenticeship. He says he learned the "dos" and "don'ts" of running a business over the more than 40 years in the trade.

As a 2-year-old, Ware got hold of his father's pliers and took his crib apart. That was the start of a life-long pattern of taking things apart, fixing things, always keeping his hands occupied. He credits his father, who worked for Venus Pen and Paper for kindling his love of "playing with art" and recalls he would steal his dad's colored pens and pencils to color and draw.

He studied at Fuji Studios under Tomaso Fujimara in Florence and then finished his BFA in jewelry design and silversmithing in Des Moines before packing up his car and driving west to California at the age of 23. As an apprentice he worked all over the Bay Area but has been in Lafayette for 22 years, first for 13 years at the Forge before moving to the current location near the Post Office nine years ago.

Apprentices learn how to resize jewelry, solder breaks and do repairs under the watchful eye of an on-site master. Ware says you become a master when you are working independently, avoiding pitfalls and using superior knowledge. He points out that apprenticeships first started in the middle ages. Goldsmithing has remained largely unchanged for 3,000 years, still working with the same simple tools.

Tennenbaum says she admires Ware's skill and remembers seeing him repair some earrings that had been mangled in a waste disposal unit. "He fixed them using reverse engineering. He has the ability to 'see it,' upside down and inside out," she says.

Ware's own favorite style of design uses twisted ribbons of gold.

An ancient art form is flourishing in a small shop in Lafayette under the watchful eye of a master goldsmith. Four apprentices are learning the craft, benefitting from the more than 40 years of experience that Stephen Ware brings.

And, notably, Ware's four apprentices are all female.

In a male-dominated field, these four young ladies are something special, says Ware, owner of Ware Designs in Lafayette. "They are artistic, talented, smart, creative and hungry," he says.

Ware has had 12 apprentices over the years. He clearly enjoys teaching and says it makes him better. His 'number one' apprentice, Juliana Tennenbaum, who has been with Ware Designs for two years, says she is learning a lot from Ware.

Tennenbaum is clearly enthusiastic about her opportunity. In a craft traditionally passed from father to

Ware admits the internet is killing business but says customers still need repairs done and says they offer a uniqueness that can't be found elsewhere for design and customer service.

Now Ware is looking to scale back his work and decided that, rather than just sell the business, it is about passing the torch. He explains that he owes it to the people who taught him his craft and gave him his start. He hopes, as his apprentices do more, that he will be able to cut back how much he works and ease into retirement that way.

"It is my duty to pass it on," says Ware.



From left: Goldsmith apprentices Julia Tennenbaum, Lauren Herrington and master goldsmith Stephen Ware.

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