

# Forging a New Life

By Evangeline Doyle

Wolfgang Rotbart calls himself a “recovering mechanical engineer with a short commute.” Recovering from the perfection of the engineering mind where everything must be a certain way – symmetrical. And crossing over to the other side, a world where nature rules and blacksmiths enjoy their creative spirit. “And the commute isn’t bad either! It’s about a fifteen-second walk from my house to the shop,” said Wolfgang.

The bug bit him early in his youth when his dad took him to a foundry. “That visit kindled a life-long passion for metalwork,” said Wolfgang. It wasn’t until later when he was attending college that he actually got started. While on a break from school, Wolfgang stumbled across Tony Myers, a local blacksmith. Myers was more than happy to show Wolfgang the craft. “Then it was just a hobby,” says Wolfgang,



Wolfgang and his wife Dianne’s work can be seen in hardware stores around Portland. These pictures were taken at Rejuvenation Hardware, 1100 S.E. Grand Avenue, Portland, Oregon.

“I didn’t know at the time it would become my life’s work.”

Wolfgang and his wife Diane moved to Vernonia in 1993. It wasn’t long after that that, about two years, when Wolfgang grew tired of the engineering world, the work environment and the commute. He realized that happiness literally was just beyond his shop’s door.



“Life is too short to be working with Dilbert-grade companies,” laughed Wolfgang, “Some people think Dilbert is just a comic – but there is more truth than fiction in that strip!” Wolfgang always keeps a Dilbert calendar handy as a reminder of why he has chosen his new line of work. Frustrations quickly fade when he compares what he’s doing today to his former work-life.

Although he jokes about being a recovering engineer, Wolfgang’s BS degree in engineering has come in quite useful in his blacksmith business. His background in CAD (computer aided design), for example, allows him to layout dimensions electronically and then recheck on-site for accuracy before starting a job. Other blacksmiths also utilize Wolfgang’s services in this area; having him produce an



electronic file from a drawing that can then be cut using laser services, saving hours of labor-intensive work.

Wolfgang works with both ferrous and non ferrous metals, and at any given time he’s working on two to ten projects. I envisioned his shop to look something like that of the blacksmith’s of yore...smoky, soot-ridden, right out of the movies. Instead it was near- pristine, an engineer’s dream shop. A good twenty different types of hammers and all neatly hanging in a row. Massive machines to coax metal into various forms, several that Wolfgang has made himself. Nearly every kind of tool and machinery you can imagine. “For custom metal work, it’s nearly a requirement to be able to make your own tools,” explained Wolfgang.

Because there’s a need for these custom tools, Wolfgang continues to copyright his inventions and sells them to other smithies on his website; look for his “Cool Tools” link online.

In general Wolfgang makes his living creating custom luxury metal items. For

Fireplace screens start at \$425 for something rather simple and \$550 - \$600 for more elaborate. Built-in screens with hinged doors start at \$2,250.

Fencing and guard rails start at \$100 a foot, for wrought iron it is \$200 - \$300 per foot. The most expensive fence Wolfgang has produced ran \$3,500 per foot.

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