



Heavy Metal

Jacksonville's Stephen Zawistowski reveals the beauty hidden inside old metal by repurposing it into functional tables, gates, and cabinets.

BY CAROLE MOORE

It's not unusual for Stephen Zawistowski to spend his days dealing with murderers, drug pushers, and thieves. But when the sun sets and he returns to his Jacksonville home, he shucks his suits in favor of a heavy leather apron and decompresses in a way that's anything but ordinary.

Here, in the tiny workshop adjacent to his house, he coaxes cold, hard metal into giving up the beauty locked inside. For Zawistowski, his metal art counterbalances his occupation as a law enforcement officer. It brings him comfort and fulfillment. And it brings his clients joy and wonder.

Early works

The home Zawistowski shares with his wife, Claire, is spare and sparkling. Wooden floors shine; interesting artwork blends with spots of bright, unexpected color; and sun floods the rooms through big, open windows. It's an intensely personal living space, one that reflects the character of its occupants and their artistic bents.

Claire, who teaches high school music, has included her husband's penchant for metal design into her decorating scheme. A large, but curiously delicate, rectangular table of glass with a metal frame stands in the family room, lined with family photos, including some of their daughter, Lauren, who attends college.

One end of the table rests on straight legs that echo the metal tray holding the glass. The other end mirrors a growing tree, with legs shaped as limbs and graceful branches extending like hands held in supplication. The faux leaves have a faint green patina about them, a subtle echo of their living counterparts. The table alternately embodies both strength and fragility, the man-made juxtaposed with the natural.

This isn't the first table Zawistowski made, but it is one of the types of projects he loves most. In the adjoining room, on the wall, is another table — also metal and glass — that, in the beginning, made him wonder if he might be good at this. It's one of his earliest works, a large half-moon of glass, supported by metal and fastened directly to the wall.



Zawistowski turns raw material into works of art using tools commonly found in blacksmiths' shops.

“Claire looked at it and said, ‘You might just have something here,’” Zawistowski says. That project sparked their first real inkling that his work could be more than a hobby or a complicated stress reliever.

Home improvement

The son of a career United States Marine employed as a heavy machinery mechanic at Courthouse Bay (a part of Camp Lejeune), Zawistowski and his family

traveled far from home but never strayed from their North Carolina roots. He was born at Camp Lejeune, only a few miles from his present home, but also lived in California and Hawaii.

“When something broke, [Dad] repaired it, or we didn’t have it,” he says. “I think that has a lot to do with how I got started [in metal art].”

The Zawistowskis moved around until the father was sent to Vietnam. Upon the father’s retirement, the family settled in Onslow County, and Stephen attended

Jacksonville High School,

which is where he met Claire. After earning a degree

in criminal justice from the

University of North Carolina at

Charlotte, he found employment

at the Hendersonville Police

Department, eventually moving on

to the North Carolina State Bureau

of Investigation (SBI). When the SBI

asked Zawistowski to go to Jacksonville,

he jumped at the chance to return home — and has been there ever since.

As a veteran law enforcement officer, Zawistowski has

worked crime scenes of every imaginable nature.

He says that he’s never grown accustomed to the deeply dark and

disturbing nature of some of the cases he’s worked.

“I’ve had the unfortunate

opportunity to see dead bodies in 10 counties,” he says. “I’ve

witnessed the results of all the big, violent, personal crimes, and it gets very old after awhile.”

Zawistowski eventually moved to the narcotics unit, and that’s

essentially where he’s spent the largest part of his career. With

two years left until retirement, he’s decided that when he

hangs up his badge and gun, he’ll work full time with

metal, teasing its form to the surface, making things of

beauty and function.

Zawistowski is searching for a large building where he

Zawistowski’s designs take a creative approach to the storage of wine.

can set up his tools, spread out a bit, and work on his projects. The tools of his trade are massive, bulky, and jammed together. While it’s tight in his makeshift workshop, Zawistowski perseveres.

He needs the break from crime fighting — and the chance to brush up against something pure and simple.

“If you don’t have something else, it’s like watching horror movies all day,” he says. “I decided my life was not going to be like that.”

Functional beauty

Zawistowski sees form and substance where there is only raw material. His blank canvas might be a hunk of iron; his

“brushes and paint” are the tools most commonly found in a blacksmith’s shop.

Although much of his work depends on traditional tools, the trained cop in him

turns to technology when it comes to designing his creations.

Using a computer program that allows him to develop his prototypes,

Zawistowski designs his latest creations — from wine bottle holders to immense,

customized gates — crafting each part with digital precision before he even

enters his workshop.

A neat cabinet, tall and thin, stands in the middle of the room. The computer

screen holds meticulously detailed drawings of each individual cabinet part.

In his hand, Zawistowski holds a copper panel stamped with leaves.

“Claire says the leaves need veins,” he explains. Zawistowski says he often relies

on his wife’s judgment. He absently pats the top of the cabinet and says, “This

part will probably be wood.”

Zawistowski hopes to build multiple versions of the cabinet to sell in galleries.

He’s also working on several other projects — fiddlehead fern letter openers with

the look of old pewter, a massive metal gate with giant butterflies, and happy, round

flowers that cartwheel across the design.

He doesn’t force any of his designs. Instead he draws them out, little by little,

looking for the right balance and the perfect fit. He may remake a project over

and over until he gets exactly what he wants. His vision may change along the

way, but he’s relentless in his pursuit of perfection.

It’s hard to believe this obsession began with a yard sale. When Zawistowski bought a welder at a local

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT TAYLOR

yard sale for \$20, he didn't know it would unleash his creative side.

"I bought some rebar (common steel bars, often used to reinforce concrete) and played for hours until I got to where I could use [the welder]," he says.

After many tries and a few false starts, he produced the half-moon table now affixed to the wall in his kitchen. Like the sofa table he made for the family room, it hosts family photos. One from the late '70s shows Stephen and Claire sitting on the beach looking off into the surf, their lives ahead of them. At the time, neither saw "heavy metal" in their future.

Scattered around the Zawistowski home are metal lamps, a holder for multiple candles that twists and turns like a living thing, and, on the front porch, a whimsical little dog. Although Zawistowski makes some of his pieces because they simply interest him, the bulk of his work thus far has been customized. And if Zawistowski's art can be small, it can also be enormous: He's built a universe of metal gates, each one more fabulous and unexpected than the next.

Dolphins frolic on one gate, giant crabs face off on another, and yet a

third features huge shrimp. It's obvious Zawistowski draws much of his inspiration from the ocean. One table, with cattails rising and encircling the glass surface, and a floor lamp that emerges

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from a bed of water lilies illustrate his fascination with all things aquatic, which is only natural given his almost lifelong proximity to the coast.

But whether he's immortalizing a pair of giant flip-flops on a gate or creating grapevine-encrusted doors for a large, customized wine niche, almost everything Zawistowski creates has a purpose.

"A lot of artistic people say that if something has a function, it's not true art," he says. "I disagree."

He often finds ways to incorporate adaptive reuse in his art, taking old metal and repurposing it into something new and beautiful.

Although he custom designs and makes iron railings on occasion, he prefers the more creative pieces, like the gate with the large Celtic cross he made for his pastor. The cross combines his art and deep religious convictions: Although he's seen the worst mankind has to offer, he believes the good outweighs the bad. His metal work helps him leave the craziness behind, freeing him to concentrate on the beauty instead.

"I got into law enforcement to make things better for people," he says. "With metal work, I also make something beautiful for them." 

Carole Moore lives in Jacksonville.

to know more

To contact Zawistowski about his work, call (910) 346-2917.

For a link to his website, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."