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A Plus

Welding students create public art with new skills

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RACINE — One of the last things Daryl Hawkins expected to be learning in his welding boot camp was art.

But the Gateway Technical College welding boot camp culminated with the students creating a group art project. The metal sculpture, “Higher Expectations,” was the capstone project for the 11 students who started the boot camp last September.

“It’s cool,” Hawkins, 32, said about doing the sculpture, which may wind up in the Racine County Workforce Development Center lobby. “It’s all of our ideas.”

The carbon steel sculpture started last summer as a brainstorm of Ben Lehner, coordinator at the Root River Environmental Education Center. In that role, he works with the University of Wisconsin-Parkside’s Center for Community Partnerships.

“Part of the Center for Community Partnerships’ mission is to build links,” Lehner said. “I just saw a link. I thought, ‘We have welding students who have a capstone experience, and we have a community that could use some art.’ ”

Lehner suggested the project to Mark Mundl, Workforce Development Center strategic coordinator and manager of the boot camp program. Mundl said he was open to the idea, as long as the welds used on a sculpture were done to professional standards, giving students the full learning experience.

“I thought it would expose students to another career opportunity,” metal sculpting, Mundl said.

Art as a capstone

In the previous boot camp, the students’ capstone project was to build a small barbecue grill to take home, said Mike Skender, the Gateway welding instructor. The metal, welded sculpture replaced those individual projects.

For a sculpture, the class was given the theme “Higher Expectations,” the name of the county’s work force development strategy. Students came up with ideas of how to express that theme in sculpture, Skender said.

“I was careful to give that totally to them.”

The ideas were synthesized into a doable design with the help of Trenton Baylor, a University of Wisconsin-Parkside associate art professor and sculpture instructor.

Baylor said he agreed to help in order to broaden students’ notions about what they can do with their new welding abilities.

“I wanted to give them some insight into what an artist might do with that skill,” Baylor said. “A welder might work in a factory, but also be able to start a little studio.”

He also brought in a UW-Parkside art student, Justin Leach, to help get the welding students to “think like an artist.”

Baylor and Leach shaped students’ ideas into what the sculpture became: a large, open book at the base; from that emerges a spiral staircase with the stairs getting larger as they go higher; and then the Earth on top.

“It’s like steps toward the world,” Skender said.

Sense of ownership

Hawkins, who wants to ultimately do underwater welding as a career, was proud of a feature he added to the sculpture: the Rocky Mountains.

He said the project definitely opened his eyes to new possibilities. “Yesterday it really clicked in my head,” Hawkins said. “There are a lot of other things I could do with this (skill).”

Nicholas Johnson, Park High School senior, did the welding boot camp as part of Racine Unified School District’s Youth Options program.

Doing the sculpture, he said, “was interesting for me because I had never put anything artsy together with metal — it was always functional.”

Part of Lehner’s idea was to give the students a feeling of being vested in the community through a piece of public art. Skender said he thinks that happened.

“I think some of them understood right away it would be something they could bring their families and children to for a very long time.

“And, in a group project, there’s give and take,” Skender said. “... So I think they had to grow a little bit because of that.”

The sculpture also required students to use all four types of welds they had learned, he said.

Lehner, father of the idea, would like to see each welding boot camp finish with a public-art sculpture. He hopes the next one can be along the Root River in a public park, or at the REC itself.

Lehner said he’s also willing to seek grant money, if necessary, to help that happen.

Asked if the next boot camp can produce another piece of public art, Mundl said, “I believe we should. ... That’s a nice outcome; there’s a secondary benefit to the community as a result of people improving their skills.”