**Fire, Steel, and Freshmen**

Blacksmithing encourages students to find strength as a team

Each year, freshmen at Academe of the Oaks spend four weeks transforming steel into art with hot forges, hammers, and anvils. Led by Corrina Mensoff and her skilled staff at Phoenix Metalworks, students craft a large-scale group project that will soon adorn part of Academe’s campus. Amid the sparks and sweat of the process, the students learn about balance, precision, and working together.

Recently, the class of 2017 completed their unit, crafting five lovely steel and copper magazine racks for the school. In previous years, students have created a steel bamboo forest sculpture, a spiral composed of concentric rings, and the school’s signature oak leaf shape festooned with leaves shaped by individual students.

At first, some students are anxious around open flames and timid with their hammer strikes. Others must temper their zeal with more care and attention to accuracy. By the end of four weeks, students are happily banging away at glowing hot steel in rhythmical patterns, singing along as they work. It’s common to find small groups of students around a single anvil, each striking the hot metal in a group rhythm.

“I liked seeing the steel change from a simple shape into a spiral,” says one student. “Plus, I learned how to swing a hammer hard!”

Blacksmithing encourages an understanding of the elemental forces of fire, water, earth, and air. Extremes of heat and other forces must be met with caution and respect. At the same time, fashioning metal into art requires a significant amount of exertion and power. In working through the process of transforming the steel, the students often learn something about themselves. Tentative students must find their strength. Others must learn to respect potentially dangerous forces.

Waldorf schools recognize the need for high school freshmen to take their experiences of extremes and find a point of balance. While this recognition informs much of the ninth grade curriculum, it is perhaps most obvious in blacksmithing, where the workshop is both a place for crafting metal and for crafting a sense of objectivity. The metal can withstand extreme heat and the blows of hammers, but these forces must be handled properly to craft the material into art.

The students find a great mentor in Mensoff, who is one of Atlanta’s most renowned blacksmiths and sculptors. Interested in metalwork since the age of five, she attended a Waldorf school in New Hampshire, where her artistic talents were further cultivated. She went on to receive her BFA from Massachusetts College of Art and her MFA from Georgia State. She currently teaches sculpture at Georgia State and has been instructing students from Academe for the last seven years. Her work is featured at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens and in many private collections.

The blacksmithing unit is one of the most anticipated parts of Academe’s extensive art program. It’s a good addition to the bookbinding, jewelry-making, and painting units, as it is a physically demanding craft as well as a highly technical one. Over the years, several Academe students have developed a true passion for blacksmithing, going on to both intern and work full time at Phoenix Metalworks.

Mensoff’s philosophy of blacksmithing education emphasizes community. Under her guidance, students work towards creating one large group project with a shared vision. Each student must first work to create his or her own individual part of the project. Then each individual part is brought together to form the whole.

“That’s what it’s all about,” said one student while shouting above the sound of the workshop. “We each made a part of these works of art, and now it’s amazing to see them coming together.”