

The True Value of Applied Education:

an ABANA Grant Experience

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Being fairly new to the blacksmith and the art industry, I realized how much I would benefit from gaining additional education to assist me. I reached out to ABANA. I had been a member for some time but honestly hadn't been an active member, other than reading the ABANA publications. After attending my first ABANA conference in Harrington, DE, I was very impressed with the organization and team work of the Association. Visiting the ABANA website provided me with the information I needed to apply for an education grant.

The purpose of the ABANA Scholarship Fund, as stated on their web page, is to provide financial assistance to ABANA members at all skill levels to assist them in the development of their blacksmithing skills and abilities. The ABANA Grant Program is available to all ABANA members and affiliates provided they have been in good standing for at least six months prior to the application. There are three different categories of grants available. Application Deadlines, criteria, and recipient obligation information is clearly explained on their web page.

I decided to apply asking for assistance enrolling in a class taught at John C. Campbell in Brassstown, NC. The school catalog described an Intermediate to Advanced class as building a round occasional table using traditional joinery techniques taught by Clay Spencer. The project would include forge welds, upsets, slit and drifted holes, lap joints, collars, simple scrolls, tenons, a tapered ring, and rivets. I already had an idea in my head about building a small gate

with traditional methods and it seemed that this class would give me the instructions for the many solid forging techniques I needed to complete this idea as well as other future projects.

I was elated when I received the phone call from the Grant Committee informing me that I had been chosen to receive a grant. I quickly registered for the class and anxiously prepared to attend. Clay Spencer sent an email to class participants describing the project and providing some instructions. We were given a list of things to bring to the class, although the school's workshop is extremely well-equipped. I studied the information and began to read and research independently as much as I could. I even tried a few forging steps in my shop at home. My goal was to get as much of my own silly mistakes out of the way before the class so I could take full advantage of the information delivered from the master, Clay Spencer.

Class began on a Sunday. I arrived at the school, registered, and attended the orientation, followed by meeting in the Clay Spencer Blacksmith Shop to begin class. Honest truth is: I was nervous. I had very little experience in blacksmith classes. I was worried about my skill level. I was worried about everything. I tried hard not to show it. I watched what others were doing and followed along. As I grew more comfortable with the shop layout and equipment, my nerves were settling. The first class session included a verbal explanation of the project. We began cutting the materials needed and started laying out the design with soap stone on the metal tables in our work stations.

Every morning Clay would ring the bell to get our attention and gather us around his teaching anvil to demonstrate. Then we would go to work. I focused on the parts of the project that I was confident about first. I was worried about falling behind in the class, so I put myself in work mode drawing out the long tapers needed and began the forge welds. This all went well. When I felt I had accomplished a fair amount of work, I decided to check on the rest of the students' progress. I had not fallen behind; I was actually ahead of the others. This helped me relax and over the next few days, I felt more and more comfortable. The other students became more social as well as we all grew more comfortable. We asked each other questions, watched each other, and shared our ideas and experiences. Clay monitored and instructed us. As we reached different segments of the project, Clay constantly kept supplying us with more demos, more elements, and more instructions. By the Friday afternoon, every student had a beautiful finished project to display at the closing ceremony that would end our week of instruction.

I learned a ton of things through this class. I learned how to build this beautiful project, just as the class description promised. What the catalog did not tell me was the huge array of other things I learned while I was there. For me, learning how to be a blacksmith student held a special value. Having access and assistance to use equipment different from what I have in my shop was additional education. Confirmation of information I already had been thinking about gave me confidence in my work. Looking around the

shop offered countless examples and test pieces to visually learn from. I took advantage of the opportunity to visit with Clay, asking him just about any question I could think of including words of advice, pet-peeves, favorite items to build, etc. Those conversations were icing on my cake!

One of the recipient obligations is to share the results of their learning with ABANA members and/or affiliates. My state Association, the Michigan Artist Blacksmith Association worked me into their meeting schedule, and CJ Forge blacksmith shop hosted my presentation and demonstration. Preparing for this event continued my learning in some unexpected ways. I built a Power Point presentation describing the ABANA Grant program and inserted several pictures from my experience including detail photos of the many different elements of the project. For my demonstration, I decided that I should prepare most of the steps and elements of the table prior to the event and have a series of already prepared pieces to carry me through without having to build the entire project for the demonstration. So my education continued in my shop at home where, alone, I began preparing for my presentation.

I thought it would be a good idea to build a little miniature table, and it would be less overwhelming. My thinking was smaller material would allow for quicker heats. The prepped pieces would be less cumbersome for my travel and be less danger working in a crowded shop of observers. I decided that I would build my miniature demo table pieces using $\frac{3}{8}$ square steel, the class table was built from $\frac{1}{2}$ square. I carried the same downsizing ratio to the entire miniature design and began to recreate the project miniaturized.

Now at my own shop, without the equipment of the school and the multiple jigs that Clay had supplied, I needed to develop methods with the equipment that was available to me. I began building tools for slit drifting my holes. While at school, the tools were provided to us. I took it for granted that the calculations of the tools size and the stock size had all been thought of for me. I learned how to use the tools at school. Now preparing the presentation pieces, I was learning how to calculate and build the tools needed. Several of the techniques taught at school used equipment I do not own yet. Determining an alternative way to accomplish what was needed with different

equipment gave me further education. I worked hard to prepare for my demonstration. But the education didn't stop there.

Now it was time for demonstrating to an audience, which can be intimidating for me. What I have learned about demonstrating is that every one of us has something that we can share and teach others. While I am able to share information with many listeners, I am also able to receive. I incorporated an assistant, a blacksmith I highly respect, for my demonstration. Working with others is a great opportunity to learn. Many times during the presentation I was offered additional information and bits of education from several respected blacksmiths in attendance.

Now, with this new education and some experience as well, the time has come to use it as I intended. My sincere thanks to the ABANA Grant Committee, Clay Spencer, and all of those who encourage me to develop, learn, and share. The ABANA Grant Program is a great membership benefit and it does work to raise the level and skill of its recipients, especially when it's used to its fullest potential. The title of this article is a quote I stole from good friend of mine, Scott Lampert. I feel very strongly that I have received the true value of this education grant.

A short video clip giving you a glimpse of the presentation can be viewed at my Facebook page, Daisy Hill Forge.

