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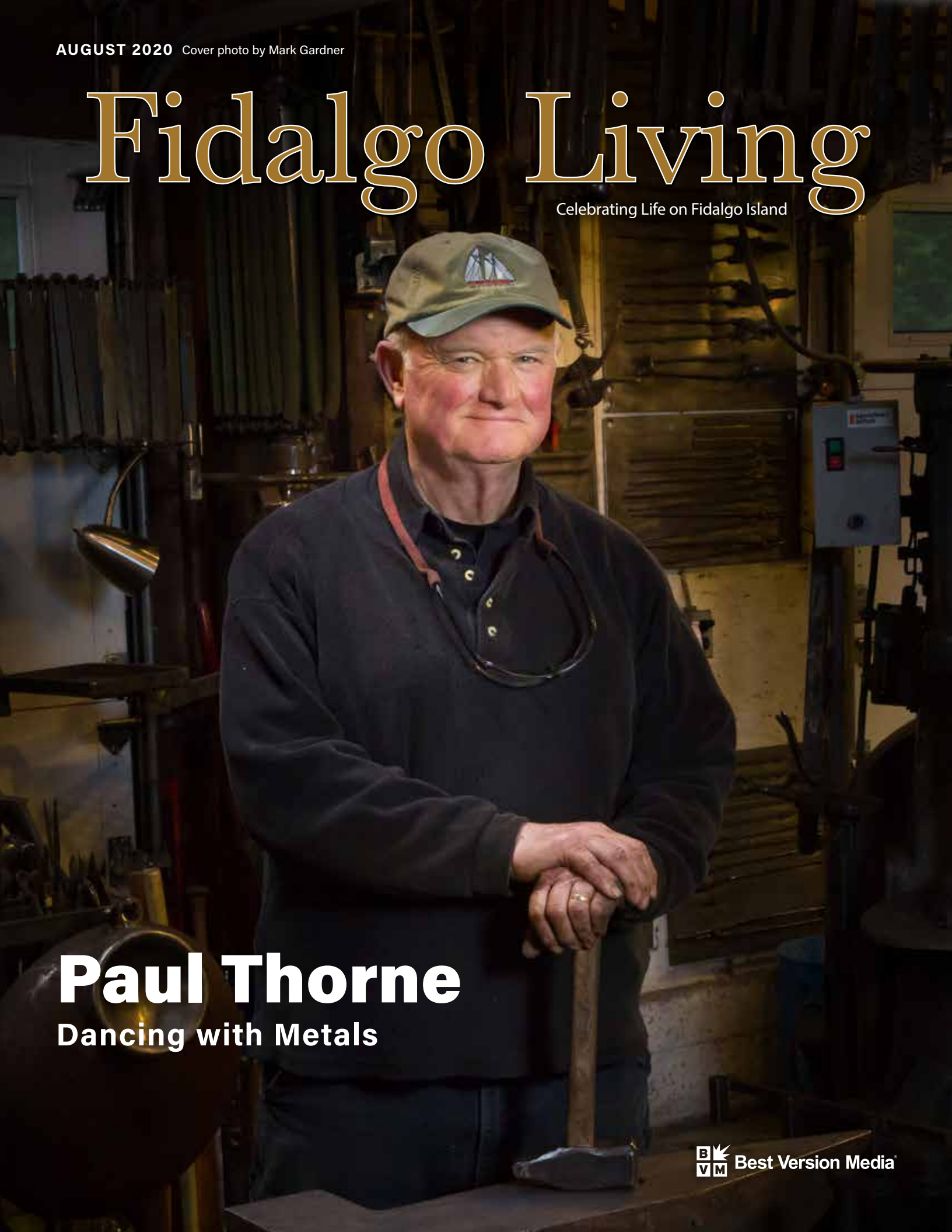
Fidalgo Living

Celebrating Life on Fidalgo Island



Paul Thorne

Dancing with Metals

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Paul Thorne
Dancing with Metals

BY ARLENE COOK
PHOTOS BY MARK GARDNER

"Without metals," Paul Thorne told me by way of greeting, "humans would still be savages." Paul is a renowned local blacksmith, metals artist and teacher. I did not know him personally, but within minutes of meeting him I decided that whether or not the metals in his life are responsible, he himself is a pretty civilized human being.

Paul and his wife Kim live just off Sharpe Road, in the center of Fidalgo Island. Paul also has his workshop there. Before giving me a tour, he showed me a timeline – a work of art in itself, constructed from a collage of worked metal fragments – that depicts the course of human civilization according to the various metallic "ages." Paul explained that the first of these, the Copper Age, commenced in Ancient Egypt 10,000 years ago with the advent of coppersmithing. "You need metal tools to cut stone and wood," he said, "so there were no cities before then." He added that tools and smithy techniques devised during the Copper Age increased in sophistication over the centuries, and in the subsequent Bronze and Iron Ages. "Metal smiths," Paul concluded, "are history's original inventors and engineers," and he is "thrilled to be part of the parade."

Having placed himself in historical context, Paul showed me around his workshop. This is a large, airy, somewhat timeless space with a gas-fired forge in the center and surrounding walls neatly lined with heavy metal tools, assorted metal scraps, filing cabinets, books on metal work and history, and a number of metal art pieces. There is also an assortment of anvils, ten or so of which are used by students who come to Paul's workshop for classes. These iconic smithy fixtures are all slightly different and represent, Paul said, "a potpourri of international anvils." Some of them are decades old. The European anvils all have horns; one of Asian design is essentially a solid block of metal without a horn, but Paul said it's just as serviceable. He himself uses a large anvil by his forge which he considers especially beautiful. It was made by a friend, a master anvil smith who sold Paul the prototype of his dream model.

I had already learned more than I ever expected to know about anvils, but Paul then handed me a hammer and invited me to try it on a British model from World War II. To my surprise, the hammer responded with almost perfect rebound. Paul explained that well-made anvils deflect almost all of the energy from each hammer blow, so that the shaping of metals requires much less physical effort from a smith than would seem apparent. Paul himself likens the working of metals to a dance: "You're not forcing the metal to do anything. The hitting is all pushing and shaping. There's no cutting, no waste. It's also a thinking process, a sequence of force, time and energy." He added that the metal pieces he works with are all recycled and repurposed: "They might once have been parts of old cars, old fishing boats, copper sewer pipes. I go to scrap metal yards and recycling centers. People who know me dump metal in my driveway!"

In non-pandemic times, Paul teaches basic blacksmithing techniques to anyone interested in learning them. No previous knowledge or experience is required, but his one-day classes are intense: "You have to really want to do it." He also teaches classes at the Anacortes Senior Center on the history of metal working, and of tools, along with a more philosophical exploration of craftsmanship: "Why do humans need to make things that are beautiful?" His own sense is that "when people put humanity into their work, it shows, and at some level we all want to see it expressed. It's a sacred thing."

Paul added, as a point of pride, that nothing leaves his workshop that isn't finely crafted – but the things he makes, including practical items like fire screens and staircase railings, and even small items like bolts, also have creative touches, such as hammered metal leaves or flowers, that make them unique and beautiful. Paul also creates items that are intended to be solely art and craft pieces. Visitors to Anacortes Arts Festivals over the years may be familiar with his works (and have likely

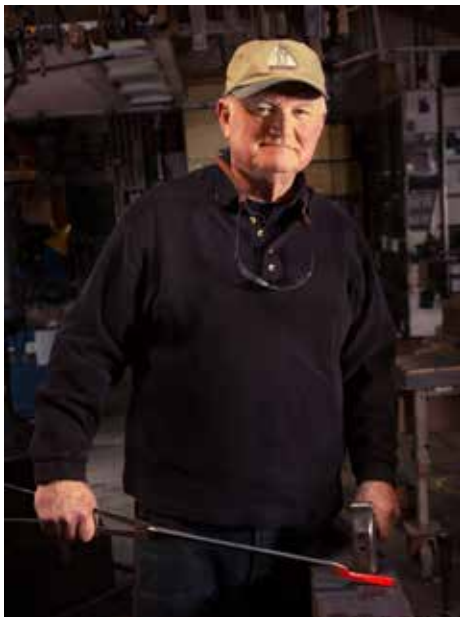
seen him in action as a demonstrator). On the day I interviewed him, he was forging a small iron bar into leaves for a metal wreath, and in a small room at the side of his workshop that serves as a gallery of sorts, he showed me some decorative circular plates made of steel. These have been etched with nature designs and are imbued with subtle colors that the metal retains after it has been heated to various temperatures.

Paul taught himself to be a smith, he said, at the age of thirty-three. But he had always been good with metals. His father was a Boeing engineer and Paul grew up tinkering in his workshop in the basement of the family home in Seattle. He took industrial machining classes as a

high school student, after struggling with the more academic subjects because of profound dyslexia. He worked summers on a large cattle ranch in eastern Washington, and proved to be so capable that he was offered a job out of high school as ranch foreman – a position that likely would have led to Paul eventually taking over the ranch. He did not appreciate this at the time, however, and opted instead to join the Marines. This was in 1966, and he was sent straight from basic training to Vietnam. He described this experience as "hugely beneficial," in that it taught him, in essence, that failure is not an option. It also taught him to figure out what was important and what was not, and to trust what is real. These are life lessons that have remained with him: "You can't fool hot iron."

After his service in Vietnam (and dealing with the shock of being vilified for it back in the US), Paul applied somewhat naively to Washington State University. He had barely scraped through high school, but was admitted to WSU on the personal recommendation of the Dean of Students, who recognized that Paul had potential and concluded: "Half of the freshmen who come here don't return for a second year. You might as well be one of them!"

Of his studies, Paul said, "I had been to war and it struck me as a pretty clumsy way to settle things, so I started on a diplomatic science/international law track. After the Marine Corps, school was easy. I got straight



A's." After an ideological conflict with one of his WSU professors, he transferred to Western Washington University and started afresh on a degree in industrial design. He also married Kim, who was a fellow student, and began working as a commercial diver to pay his way through college. That led to an ongoing career in diving and engineering work with the world's most advanced undersea technology company. Paul refined diving and submersible robotic equipment. "I was a pretty good machinist," he said. "I could build everything I designed." He spent ten years in the undersea business, devising projects, flying all over the world on troubleshooting missions, and rising to the position of company Vice President. But, at the age of thirty-three, he felt stressed out and dissatisfied with his career.

A revelation came one fitful night when he went into his garage and began working on a large nail with a blowtorch and a hammer. By 2am the nail had been transformed into a tiny spoon with an elegant spiral handle. Paul did the same thing the next night and produced a matching fork. On the third night, the end result was a small drill bit of the sort used in woodworking. Paul was aware of feeling variously exhilarated, free and joyful as he worked, but he didn't know what to make of the experience until he decided, after a bit of research, to attend a gathering in Wisconsin of the Artist-Blacksmith's Association of North America (ABANA). "I felt totally intimidated, but everybody was friendly. I met smiths and metal workers from all over the world and watched demonstrations of their work."

At that time, Paul and Kim were living in Santa Barbara. They had three small boys and a large mortgage. Paul called Kim from Wisconsin and said, 'I need to be a blacksmith…'" Kim suggested he come home and think about it, but Paul had made up his mind. He resigned from his job and set up shop in his garage. Work came his way almost immediately without him having to look for it. "I made a nine-foot cross for a cemetery, a garden gate, candlesticks…" Commissions

kept coming, but Paul and Kim saw no other reason to stay in Santa Barbara and decided to move home to Western Washington. They knew of Anacortes from family camping trips to Orcas Island, and happened upon a property on Sharpe Road that belonged to a welder and had a large shop attached to it. "That was in 1988," Paul said, "I started work right away. I've been at it ever since."

While Paul has followed his calling, he considers his wife, Kim, to be "incredibly strong, loving and brave in sticking with me for the forty-nine years of our marriage. She was raised in a family of teachers. They like things calm from one year to the next. She's the complete opposite of me!" Though she trained as a teacher, Kim stayed at home to raise their sons. She then worked in Anacortes schools as a para-educator and reading specialist before retiring last year. Of Paul and Kim's sons, Cameron, is an electrical engineer with an alternative energy company; Kelly is a member of US Navy SEAL Team Six; Colin is an infantry officer in the US Army. There are nine Thorne grandchildren.

Paul said his advice to his sons was to find their calling in life, and he believes this is applicable to everybody. "Find out what you like to do, put your whole heart behind it, and you will get good at it." As a blacksmith, he's had some lean times, and after the financial crisis of 2008 he worked for two years as a machinist, but he seems to have no regrets about his choices. He's now ostensibly retired from blacksmithing, meaning he no longer does commissions, but he looks forward to doing more teaching. Meanwhile, he continues to spend most days in his workshop, dancing with pieces of metal on his anvil.

To learn more about Paul and his work visit www.thornemetals.com