



Craig Kaviar takes glowing metal that used to be a gun barrel to his anvil to hammer it into shape. He is a Louisville metal forger who takes discarded guns and transforms them into garden tools and works of art.

GUNS TO GARDENS

Local blacksmith forges weapons into tools, art



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USA TODAY NETWORK

Craig Kaviar suspected the gun barrel in his hand was an antique, but really that didn't matter. He didn't know where it had been or how it had been used.

The blacksmith was more focused on what it was going to become.

As Kaviar nestled the barrel into a bed of coals on his forge, two buckets of sawed-up gun pieces sat near the front of his Louisville shop and a handmade garden tool rested on his worktable. For the past six months, he's been repurposing destroyed guns into hoes and forks in a program akin to the national Guns to Garden movement. Throughout the country anti-violence groups have collected and destroyed unwanted guns, and tapped craftspeople, such as Kaviar, to repurpose those weapons into jewelry, art, or tools.

The next local safe gun surrender is Sunday, June 11, from 2-4 p.m. at Douglass Boulevard Christian Church, 2005 Douglass Blvd., and Louisville's Gun Violence Prevention Team will accept and take a chop saw to any unloaded gun.

The Louisville blacksmith isn't naïve. He doesn't expect to stamp out gun violence in this country with the dozen guns he's already repurposed. Kaviar alone can't stop the 163 non-fatal criminal shootings that Louisville Metro Police Department has already tracked year. Heating a single gun barrel at 3,000 degrees, reshaping it with a hammer, and transforming it into a tool won't stop the 74 homicides that have already happened this year.

Kaviar's part of this project is small, but there's a deep symbolism that comes with molding metal into something that's used to grow rather than kill.

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A piece of metal art from a former gun barrel and wood stock crafted by Craig Kaviar.



The cut-up pieces of gun barrels await use by Craig Kaviar.

PHOTOS BY MATT STONE/COURIER JOURNAL

Guns

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“I think we have way too many guns and way too many deaths,” Kaviar said. “And although this is mostly symbolic, and it isn’t going to really get the most dangerous guns off the street, it is making a statement.”

‘No questions asked’

A lot needed to happen before those bins full of gun parts arrived at his shop on Stevenson Avenue last December after Louisville’s first Guns to Gardens event. It took several months and careful planning for the Gun Violence Prevention Team, an interfaith group that started at Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church, to partner with Kaviar and get Louisville’s Guns to Garden program off the ground.

Legally and safely disposing of a gun is much trickier than buying one, Eva Stimson, a member of the group, told the Courier Journal. They need security on-site to make sure the guns are unloaded upon arrival. Once the gun is surrendered, it’s broken into pieces using a chop saw. The gun’s owner has to watch it be hacked apart, so the Gun Violence Prevention Team isn’t liable for it and there isn’t an unwanted transfer of ownership.

The organization keeps a record of the destroyed weapons’ serial numbers, but beyond that, the surrender is very much “a no questions asked” event. This Sunday will be the second event of its kind in Louisville.

Often stories about the gun’s origin come out as the pile of destroyed guns grows during collection. There are many reasons people end up with guns they don’t want, Stimson said. Sometimes they are inherited, left to people who don’t know how to use them and don’t want to learn.

Other times, gun owners become wary of them when they become parents or grandparents and have children in the home. One man even brought the gun his son used to kill himself, and for that person, Stimson said, the chopping was almost cathartic.

Gun violence in Louisville is a problem, and while Stimson doesn’t expect this program to stop the violence, she finds hope in it.

“That’s really inspiring,” Stimson said. “The thought of turning an instrument of death into an instrument of life and healing and beauty.”

The notion even appears in the Bible in the book of Isaiah, Stimson pointed out.

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks,” it says.

That’s not quite what happens in Kaviar’s shop, but the sentiment is very much there.

‘Better purposes for metal’

The national arm of Guns to Garden



Craig Kaviar uses a World War II-era 200 pound press to flatten gun barrels. PHOTOS BY MATT STONE/COURIER JOURNAL

Want to go?

WHAT: Guns to Gardens Safe-Surrender for guns. This is run by a collaboration of individuals from faith and community groups concerned about gun violence in Louisville. It is part of a national Guns to Gardens movement launched in cooperation with RAWtools and the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.

WHEN: Sunday, June 11, 2-4 p.m.

WHERE: Douglass Boulevard Christian Church, 2005 Douglass Blvd, Louisville

THINGS TO KNOW: Guns must be unloaded prior to entering church property and placed in the trunk or rear of the vehicle. Skilled personnel will remove firearms from vehicles and take them to a chop saw for disabling while the person bringing the gun is present. Serial numbers will be recorded to document the gun’s destruction. Ammunition will not be accepted. The gun pieces will be forged into tools, art, or jewelry at a later date. You do not receive a garden tool for surrendering your gun.

CONTACT: Email Guns2GardensLouisville@gmail.com for more information

sent Kaviar directions on how to build the tools when he first started working with the destroyed guns. No two pieces in the buckets are the same, and at first, it took several hours under his careful eye and strong hand to transform the broken pieces into useful tools.

Now he moves from step to step and station to station in the shop with a clear method. His power hammer, which once operated on a battleship from World War II, can pummel the end of a gun barrel into a flat, sharp hoe with several loud clangs. The hole in the center where the tool’s handle goes is actually the most difficult part, he said. He uses a presser machine that he bought at auction from an old ammunition plant in Southern Indiana to make the gap in the center of the barrel. From there, it’s a series of careful swings of his hammer that shapes it into a circle.

Lately, he’s been experimenting with turning wooden gun handles into carved jewelry and shotgun barrels that are too narrow to work as tools into sculptures.

Kaviar has been blacksmithing in



Sparks fly as Craig Kaviar hammers glowing metal on an avil to shape a gun barrel into a garden tool.

Louisville since the late 1980s. He studied art and sculpture at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, which is now part of Tufts University in Boston, and then shifted to functional artwork as a more viable way to make a living.

He’s well known for making the entrance to the Crab Orchard Animal Sanctuary in Crestwood and he’s taken commissions from big names like Brown-Forman Corporation, Norton Healthcare, Woodford Reserve and The Temple. His work appears in multiple churches and countless homes and yards in the area.

This assignment is different, though. For Kaviar this work is almost religious.

As he heated the forge up to a sweltering 3,000 degrees on a recent day, the gun barrel he was manipulating glowed a

radiant orange as bright as the flames that flickered around it.

An hour and countless maneuvers later, it didn’t look like a weapon at all. The smooth barrel had roughened with each bang of his hammer. Slowly he perfected that hole in the center. Then the flattened hoe appeared, and finally, that fork at the end emerged.

He’d taken something that was once dangerous and turned it into something that could be used to plant flowers or even vegetables.

“It’s making a statement,” he said. “There are better purposes for metal than weapons.”

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