Scholarship from guild aids craft

From the beginning, Sam Riehl has been drawn to blacksmithing. Now, with a $1,000 mentoring scholarship from Festivals Acadiens et Créoles and the Louisiana Crafts Guild, the 7th grader at Sts. Leo and Seton is pursuing his craft in earnest.

He will join other more experienced blacksmiths at this weekend’s Festivals as they exhibit work that has its origins thousands of years ago.

“It’s a three-part scholarship,” Riehl said. “I happen to receive it in my category. I’ve been taking all these classes by different guys, making little things. I’ll be showing things at the demonstration table that I’ve made using the grant.”

“Pat Mould and Barry Ancelot of Festivals came up with the idea,” said Miles Peterson of the Louisiana Crafts Guild. “They’ve given back to the community in so many ways, and they wanted to do something more. They’re helping people in the fields of cooking, music and crafts.

“They suggested he use the money for classes and equipment, to enhance his ability in the future. It’s really a nice gesture.”

Riehl’s mother, Ange, teaches art at St. Thomas More and works in glass. His grandmother Ellen Caillouet works in stained glass. Both are intriguing art forms, but didn’t fit his interests.

“I used to do lampwork, glass beads,” Riehl said. “My mom works in glass beads. But it wasn’t my thing.”

It quickly became apparent what that thing was.

“We would go to Pyromania, to help my mom set up and take down displays, and she could never find me,” Riehl said. “I was always watching the blacksmiths work. Now, I’ve demonstrated at Pyromania in a row and last October I was in Festivals.”

“To have young people interested in blacksmithing is very exciting,” said local blacksmith Richard Deleoussaye. “We didn’t have to look for Sam. He found us at Pyromania one year. He was standing there in shorts and asked if he could work with us, and we told him, ‘No, you have to have long pants and shoes.’ The next day he showed up in long pants, with gloves and glasses, and said ‘Can I work with you?’ He’s been with us ever since.

“When you teach Sam something, he learns it the first time. And, he’s a great entertainer showing off his craft.”

One of the younger members of the Louisiana Metalsmith Association, Riehl has found kindred spirits willing to teach him.

“Sam is just an all-around polite young man,” blacksmith Jerry Baker said. “His parents and grandparents did a dynamite job. He’d show up at Pyromania in the morning and didn’t leave until the afternoon.

“He’s interested since he was 7 or 8 years old.”

The age-old craft, dating back to Biblical times, was once taught in an apprentice setting. In England, according to Baker, a 4-year apprenticeship is still required.

“It’s all a learning process,” Riehl said. “That’s what LAMA is, teaching other people. I’m still on my way up.”

“The most they’ve taught me is to be patient and to do it,” Riehl said. “It’s not easy.”

When Riehl isn’t at shops owned by Delhoussaye or Baker, he’s in a backyard shop converted from his father’s shed. He also works on projects at UL’s new metal shop. Riehl, who spends what remains of his spare time in drama productions, plans to study architecture at UL in the future. He figures his craft could add touches to architectural projects.

“The hardest part is finding the time for everything,” Riehl said. “But I enjoy it.”

Eighth-grader Sam Riehl talks to The Advertiser Monday afternoon in his backyard blacksmithing shop.