

Sparking a passion

Firefighter transforms would-be junk into art



BY CAROLYN DIX REMER
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Most folks don't find themselves in a junkyard. But Allison Meade does. She roams the discarded remnants of people's lives, looking for inspiration for her next welded work of art, piece of furniture or handbag.

"I like to give old things a new life," said Meade, a firefighter and artist who uses items such as old tailpipes and steel wheels to create her pieces.

"I see beauty in things that most people view as garbage," she said.

She doesn't go to salvage yards in search of anything in particular. More likely she comes across an item — from an oil pan to a metal scrap — that sparks an idea.

Her passion for repurposing discarded automobile parts started about 10 years ago. Her roommate was welding together pieces of an old Studebaker pickup truck in his garage. And Meade was inspired.

Born in Springfield, the self-described "vintage car chick" moved to Columbus and attended Columbus State Community College for automotive technology and welding in 2004. She obtained her associates degree in automotive technology, and though she did not receive a degree in welding, she continued

taking welding classes after graduation.

"I fell in love with the whole welding process and started welding automotive pieces together," she said.

She recalled going to a salvage yard and noticing "beautiful pre-1960s cars" on a conveyor belt, destined to be crushed.

"It broke my heart," she said. "These things have so much meaning." She said she felt an urge to make them into something beautiful instead of letting them be melted down.

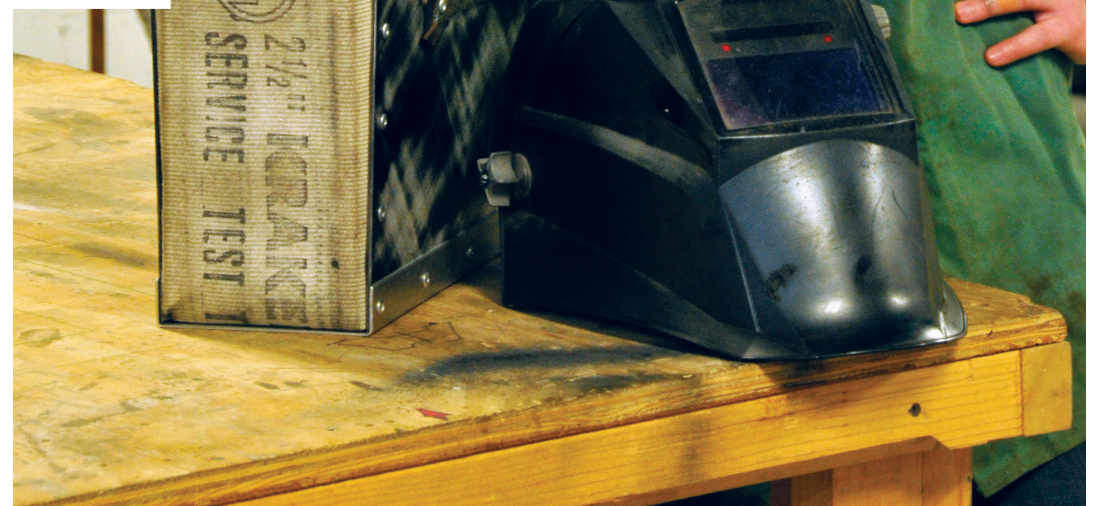
"I wanted to preserve the beauty that they have," she shared. "It's my way of making a small difference, preserving something rare and precious that would otherwise be thrown into a fire."

So, Meade started using old car parts to create artistic sculptures and furniture. She uses tailpipes, pistons, steel wheels and salvaged glass.

Though she didn't set out to be a "green" artist, she said that using discarded materials just came natural to her.

"Not only does using discarded materials save them from the landfill, but it also cuts down on material costs for the artist and adds tremendous character to our work," Meade said.

"Using materials with a previous life can really personalize art for the potential buyer," she added.



Firefighter and artist Allison Meade makes purses from discarded fire hoses.

PHOTOS BY JOHN KNOUFF

Meade has created a bulldog sculpture — inspired by her own three-legged bulldog — out of an oil pan, a hot rod chandelier out of pistons and a Native American sculpture out of automotive and motorcycle parts after learning about her own Native American heritage.

Though Meade attended school for automotive technology and is inspired in her art by old car parts, she said she knew she didn't want to be a mechanic.

"I wanted something more fast-paced that would allow me to serve the public and hold me accountable for staying in shape physically," she said.

Following jobs working for a hot-rod shop while in college and a five-year stint

in public utilities for the City of Columbus, Meade decided to follow in her stepfather's footsteps and become a firefighter. She graduated from the Columbus Fire Academy in February 2014.

"It's awesome. It's pretty challenging, especially being a female, but it is also really fun," she said.

Despite the demanding hours, she has continued to weld her recycled-metal works of art as a hobby. Her new career has even inspired some new projects.

Meade salvaged some old fire hoses that were going to be thrown out to make a handbag. She creates these custom handbags using aluminum, leather and hoses, and she has found success selling them.

"My co-workers often purchase these handbags for their wives or daughters as a great way for their loved ones to show support for their career in firefighting," Meade said. "It's both unique and personal to them."

She has also taught welding classes at the Columbus Idea Foundry, a "maker space" in Franklinton consisting of a community workshop, learning center and creative space for welding, woodworking and 3-D printing. This is also where she creates her works of art.

To see Meade's work, visit her website, oldsoulstudio.com. Or pop over to the Columbus Idea Foundry and check out its unique sign made from repurposed scrap metal. She created it.