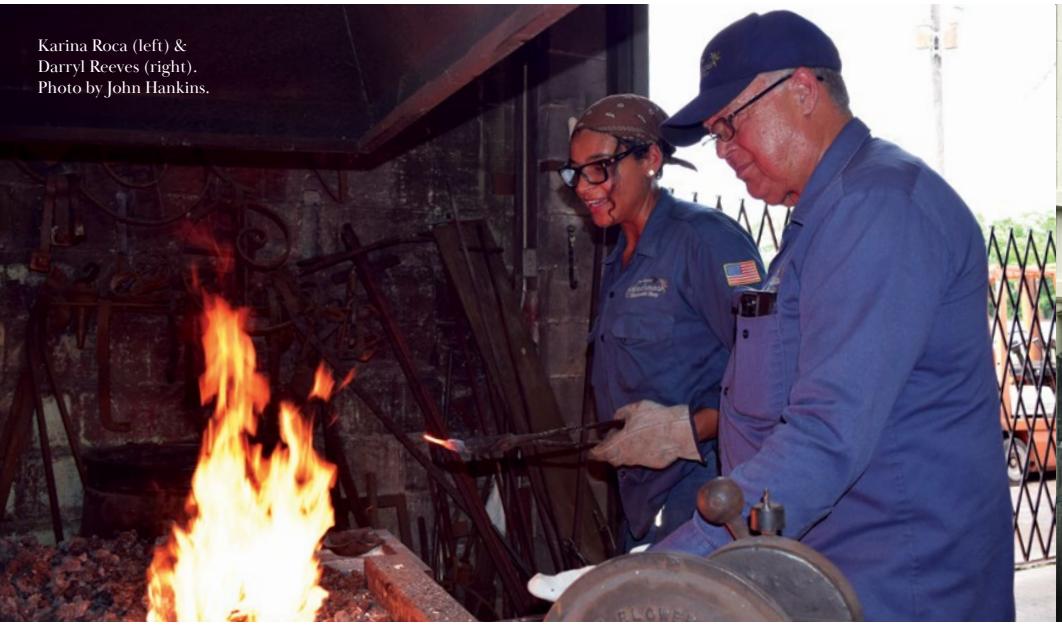
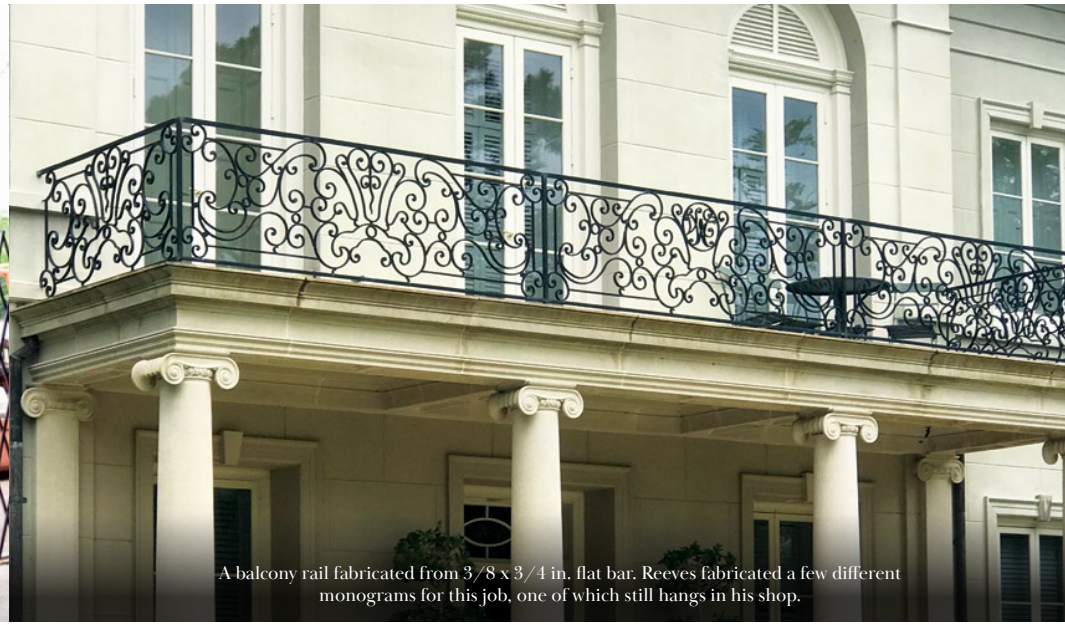


Karina Roca (left) & Darryl Reeves (right). Photo by John Hankins.



A balcony rail fabricated from 3/8 x 3/4 in. flat bar. Reeves fabricated a few different monograms for this job, one of which still hangs in his shop.

2026 ABANA Conference Spotlight
Darryl Reeves and Karina Roca: Passing the Torch

From an interivew on Octover 16, 2025. Edited for clarity and brevity by Addison de Lisle.
All photos courtesy of the the artists. Learn more about Darryl Reeves at darrylreevesblacksmith.com

Darryl Reeves: My family's from Donaldsonville, Louisiana. My grandfather worked on Saint Emma Plantation as a blacksmith, and every so often we'd take a pass around there. He was making and repairing plows and equipment that they were using. I would say that was the first introduction to metal in my life, even though I wasn't taking it very serious.

When I came out of high school, I went to work at Avondale Shipyard. They'd teach you how to weld, and when you graduated from the class, you had a job. So, I worked the night shift in the late '60s 'till I got drafted in the '70s. When I came out of the service, I used the GI Bill for electronics, but I also was welding to support myself while I was doing that. My family has Andrew and Son's Awning Company, and we worked in the quarters where all that old hardware was. People kept asking if I knew anybody that could make this hardware. I knew I probably could if I put my mind to it, but I never took an interest until a woman told me how much she'll pay for a strap hinge. That put the hook in.

At that point, my kids was in school and I'd take them to the library, and I started to pull out old blacksmith books, and they also had bookstores that you could buy old blacksmith books out of. I was digging up them old blacksmith books. So in the '70s and '80s, I was being educated out of the books. By 1990, I was making more money with my side hustle than my regular job, so we opened a structural welding shop to pay the bills, and a small part of it was doing restoration and making old hardware, for a lot of properties in the area. When I opened my shop up, even though I was educated as a blacksmith out of books, I never was able to find a blacksmith to apprentice under. You could get so much out of books, but to get the real details, you need to work with somebody. They had this guy by the name of James repairing these old buggies and taking care of mules for a funeral home in New Orleans. I approached him and brought him in my shop because he understood heating up metal and stuff. Through him, I met Buddy Leonard out in Covington, where they had the Gulf Coast Blacksmith Association. They used to have a meeting once a month, and I got to meet a lot more blacksmiths then. Buddy was a retired farrier, and he used to get projects to work on. He was up in age, and I used to volunteer my services with him to tighten up my skills. I used to shut my shop down in the evening in New Orleans, and Covington's about hour's ride across the lake, and I used to take that ride when he had a project he needed help with. Between Buddy Leonard and David Mudd, I got to meet a lot of blacksmiths. That was a BIG jump in my skills. They used to get a kick out of me. I remember one time, it was at a meeting, and they were looking at a pipe, and they were trying to figure out what to do with a pipe. They said, "I bet you Darryl could tell you what to make with this pipe." I said, "A bell pepper." We was having a blacksmith meeting and we had about five forges running, and I took that pipe and I made a bell pepper. They said, "Only Darryl; only Darryl!" Those was good memories.

My business is run by me and my wife, and I'm grateful for her help with accomplishing my goals in the trade. The Cabildo is where Louisiana Purchase was signed in 1803, and that building was designed in the 1790s. They have a twin building on the opposite corner, which is the Presbytère. Now, of those two buildings, the Presbytère put the fence up that was designed for it, but they never did it on the Cabildo. In the late '90s, they was looking for somebody to fabricate a fence to put on the Cabildo, to the original blueprint. The contractor was talking to an engineer in Mississippi who told him about me, right here in New Orleans, and they asked me to submit a sample, and I got the job. You have the Cabildo, the [Saint Louis] Cathedral, and you have the Presbytère. I've done the complete metal restoration on Jackson Square and the Presbytère, and some repairs on the Cathedral. These are some of the oldest properties in New Orleans, and that gives me a great deal of pride.

Karina Roca: For me, it's always nebulous having to put it together in a story, because it was just this

act of faith. I grew up in the Boston area and then moved to New York City for undergrad. Fifteen years ago, I saw a PBS special about this guy named Darryl Reeves in the Seventh Ward in New Orleans doing my dream job. I've always secretly been interested in metalwork, but growing up in Boston, I would never see women or people of color in positions to do restoration work on this scale. I've always wanted to do it, but never had access or connections in that world to pursue it. I was already thinking about moving to New Orleans anyway, and when COVID happened, I was in Brooklyn with six roommates, and it was already unlivable. So I said, "Now or never!" and bought a one-way ticket to New Orleans, mailed all my stuff to myself with maybe three hundred dollars to my name. When I came into Darryl's shop and he was really skeptical of me at first...

Darryl: Because I never heard from this young lady until she stepped in my shop!

Karina: At the time I stepped in his shop, I had graduated university magna cum laude with a double major, and I say that because I couldn't read a measuring tape! If that's not the living, breathing example of what is wrong with this country, I don't know what is! So I learned how to read a measuring tape, and I wasn't scared to be burned, and I wasn't scared to be wrong. For the first year or so, I swept the shop and I wasn't allowed touch any tools, but I knew what everything was, and I was so excited and passionate about being in this space and watching this alchemy happen every day. I just totally fell in love with it.

Ironically, as I'm talking all this smack about college, I also went back to school and joined the Master's program in Historic Preservation through the Tulane School of Architecture. In a place like New Orleans, where ironwork is a huge part of its identity, craftspeople are the real preservationists, architects, and engineers, but they don't get the credit for it. There's so much missing from the historic record, and instead of being upset about it, I want to add to that body of knowledge.

Darryl: You have to understand, I encourage the devil out of her. I always felt if I had the right

"A lot of different styles of forged work is accumulated in this gate, which sits on an underground gate operator." -Darryl Reeves

apprentice, I was going to push them to get as much education as possible. And Karina was the perfect person, because she wasn't scared of hitting the books. I mean, this young lady, straight As at Tulane University! I see a lot of gobbed-up projects on some of the oldest properties in this city. If this young lady is in charge of a restoration, she's gonna know what she's looking at. That's a big positive, because when I see something that's not restored properly, I gotta admit, it gets underneath my skin. Our architecture is so unique and so original, and that's what brings people to New Orleans. They say they're taking care of it, but it should be done better.

Karina: I come to class rusty and dusty, but I feel so empowered to build this bridge between vocational skills and academic research. The very same architecture programs that gawk over these buildings don't talk about the craftspeople who fabricated them. The culmination of this program is either writing a thesis or doing a practicum, which is an eleven-week study somewhere. I'm one of the only people in my cohort who chose the practicum route, and I don't know how the others can do this without actually touching these materials!

This past summer, I did an eleven-week study under Ken Schwartz at Colonial Williamsburg. It was incredible to work in a real 18th-century shop, with no power at all. I knew that it was going to be a challenging experience, and I would go home every day looking like a chimney sweep, but I felt it was necessary to ground myself in the trade. It was awesome to see the differences between the English techniques and the French and the Spanish. I learned to love and respect the English style. The English wanted everything to be so uniform and straight-cut and boring, but it actually requires so much skill!

Darryl: New Orleans blacksmithing is so unique because it's a mix of African, French, and Spanish techniques. This trade, no matter where you come from on this globe, is passed down generationally, so that's how you were taught how to put metal-work together. When you start tearing this stuff apart, you can see the difference. That's the part of my education that I'm the most proudest of. I get

to see all the different techniques that people used, and I get to keep the ones that I like the best.

That's the joy; that's the conversation! I'm talking to the people that put it together, even though I don't know who they were. People don't talk about it, but you brought Africans here with nothing more than what they had in their minds, in their education, and in their culture. And they brought that here. You could go all through New Orleans, we have symbols of family, and joy, religion. Everybody looks at these designs as beautiful pieces of ironwork, but the symbols in them are breathtaking.

Karina: Once you know, it's like when somebody points out a red car to you, and then all you see are red cars. It's the same with the Adinkra symbols, because they're in every major city in America where there were Black, enslaved laborers. People think that the Transatlantic Slave Trade was this nebulous thing, but it was the very intentional capture of specifically metalworkers who went back twenty, twenty-five generations in the trade from the Senegambia, West Africa. As laborers, they etched their collective memories, proverbs, and symbols into the built environment. And nobody questioned it, because it was just a pretty design. For instance, Sankofa is one of the most popular ones you'll see. It just looks like a heart, but if it was made by a West African, it most likely is a representation of Sankofa, which is a bird looking back on its past and its ancestry.

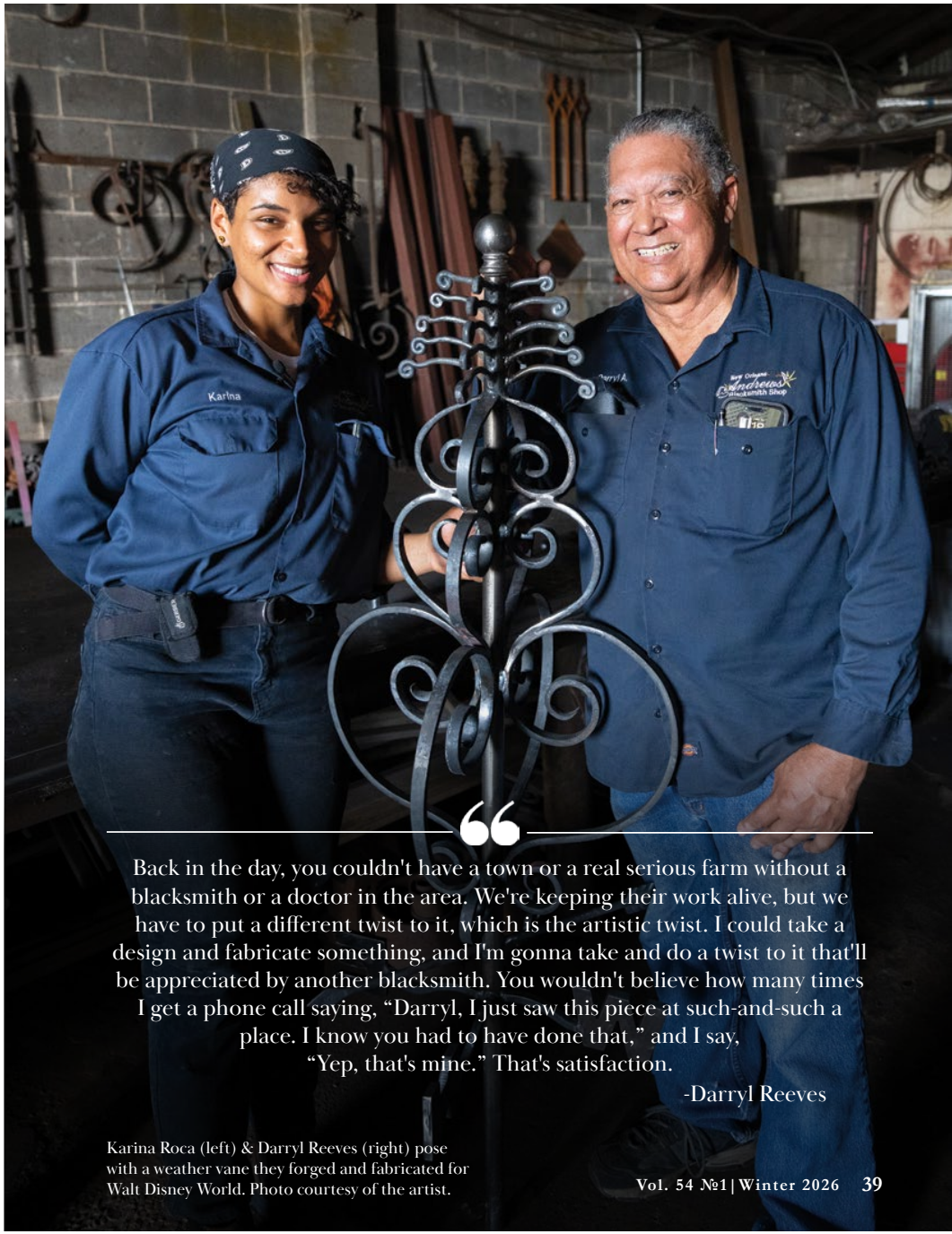
Darryl: Put it like this. A person that's been stripped of everything might pass a symbol on the street and see something familiar. That had to bring comfort to them. Even as simple as something like that had to mean a lot to somebody that's been stripped of everything. That's the way I look at it.

Karina: It's striking to realize that people who are descended from the very craftspeople who constructed many of our cities are left off the historical record. Representation is more important than we might want to give it credit for. When you're a young person, you're subconsciously aware of it, and it's hard to be and to become what you don't see. Diversity in the preservation trades really is a problem, tied to many systemic barriers to access and education. These trades were historically handed down through family lineages, and if your dad didn't teach you, well, you at least had exposure to it through shop class. Those times have changed. Today, to learn a craft you were not born into, you have to commit to massive amounts of debt to learn it hands-on. Many young, working class people of color simply cannot afford high tuition. I went about it very unconventionally, approaching Darryl to take me on as an apprentice. But how do we support young people who want to learn, but don't know where to begin?

Darryl: That goes with the way this country looks at the trades. They doesn't give it the respect they should give it. Because everybody need a roof over their head, no matter what. You have to have a house, you have to have a hospital, you have to have libraries. Somebody has to build all this stuff. The way society looks at craftspeople is, to me, backwards. You can make a good living being a craftsperson. Most trades will pay you to learn the trade, and once you have a trade, it's yours. Taking trade classes out of junior high school and high school was one of the stupidest things they ever did. Not everybody wants to go to college. You could go get a decent job with a carpenter or welding shop if you have the basics underneath your belt.

Karina: And even if you do go to college, when you have a trade, it's all the more rich. For me, witnessing Darryl - a person of color doing historic restoration work - is the only reason I felt courageous enough to pursue this dream. The inspiration he instilled in me is what I want to gift forward the most, connecting youth to the trades and to the powerful history grounding it, that many people of color have a stake in, whether they can see it or not.

I will always need to be in the shop, but I'm edging into the education and advocacy side of building trades. The lack of representation in our field motivates me to share my experiences forward, and to inspire other women and people of color to see themselves thriving in this field. I want to redefine who gets to be seen as stewards of our built heritage.



> Back in the day, you couldn't have a town or a real serious farm without a blacksmith or a doctor in the area. We're keeping their work alive, but we have to put a different twist to it, which is the artistic twist. I could take a design and fabricate something, and I'm gonna take and do a twist to it that'll be appreciated by another blacksmith. You wouldn't believe how many times I get a phone call saying, "Darryl, I just saw this piece at such-and-such a place. I know you had to have done that," and I say, "Yep, that's mine." That's satisfaction.
>
> -Darryl Reeves

Karina Roca (left) & Darryl Reeves (right) pose with a weather vane they forged and fabricated for Walt Disney World. Photo courtesy of the artist.