

2026 ABANA Conference Spotlight: 'The Future of Blacksmithing' Demonstration Team

By Addison de Lisle. Based on an interview on March 18, 2026, edited for length, clarity, & flow.
Photos courtesy of the artists.

Smithing has a strong association with the past, even more so than most other traditional arts. Many people will expound on its history – indeed, it is the focus of some smiths’ careers – but it is more unusual to hear about what’s next for the field. That’s where “The Future of Blacksmithing” team comes in. Comprised of twelve demonstrators for the upcoming “Forging in the Ozarks” ABANA Conference, this group of emerging smiths has some ideas about the future they want to see. As an initiative of ABANA to make space for younger smiths to participate, they will host a collaborative, multi-pronged demonstration that embodies their aspirations for the smithing community.

The core of their demonstration will be producing a collaboratively designed bench which will be forged and assembled on-site, and they encourage anyone who wants to swing a hammer to jump in! They will also smelt iron for use in some elements of the project and offer a hands-on teaching area for people to try forging simpler components for the bench. This collaborative and open approach reflects their mission to make people feel welcome in the smithing community.

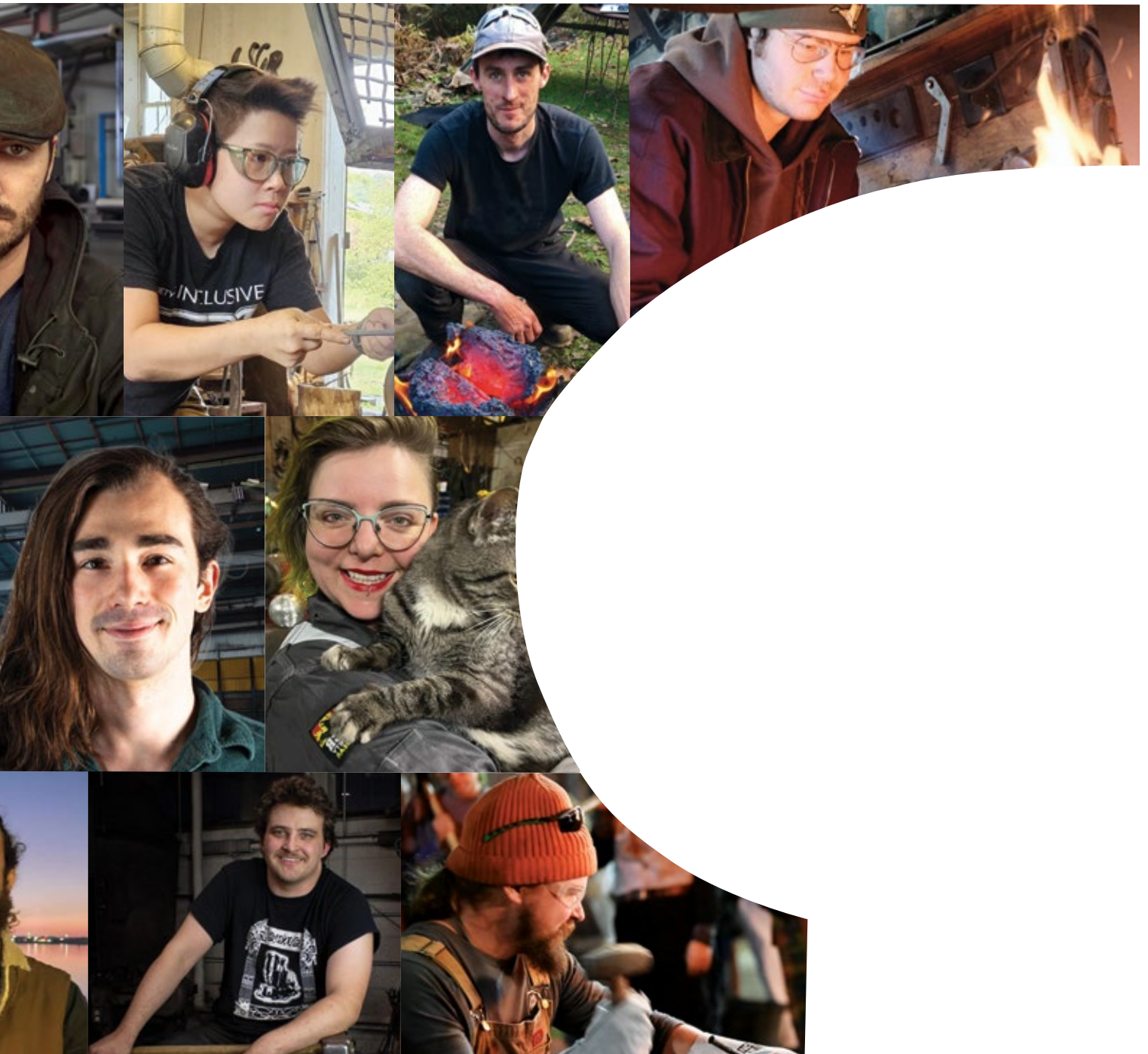
Anna Koplik, the team “cat herder” and a journeyman smith, prioritized inviting a broad range of people with different forging experiences.

“It was important to make our team represent what the future of blacksmithing could look like. We’re a diverse group, a lot of different people from different backgrounds, and we also have a good representation of organizations and schools to show different ways that people can be involved with blacksmithing. We have people from various craft schools like Touchstone Center for Craft in Pennsylvania, we’ve got people who are current or former students from the American College of the Building Arts in South Carolina, SIU Carbondale in Illinois, and UW Milwaukee in Wisconsin. We’ve got people working at local organizations like Rivers of Steel in Pittsburgh. We’ve got people working from the Metal Museum in Tennessee.



The team, from horn to heel, top to bottom:

L. Star, Arthur Bildur Gibson, Anna Koplik, Zachary Hess, Nina Yao, Eric Dennis,
Owen Riedesel, Aidan Rhoades, Mak Henriksen, Jacob Bendt,
Bowen Beaty, & Andrew Welton.



We've got people from the Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths (SIBs). We have people like myself, who have spent a long time on the journeyman circuit all around the country. We wanted a diverse group of people involved, but also a broad representation of different ways to get that education.”

Andrew Welton, a team member whose background includes getting a Ph.D. in history by studying and recreating Medieval metalwork, adds:

“We're hoping that people will see that young professional smiths come from a lot of different backgrounds. Like, I'm white and I have a beard, and I study medieval history. But there are a lot of other people in our group, and we're hoping that people can see that if they're a young woman, they can be a blacksmith. If they're queer, they can be a blacksmith. We want to help people find themselves in the future of blacksmithing, and we're hoping that our demonstration creates a space for conversations for more people to see themselves in the wider blacksmithing world.”

The historical stereotype of the smith as a brawny, sweaty man epitomized by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's classic poem *The Village Blacksmith*, is a romantic one, and the poem itself extols classic virtues of honest labor and individualism. However, many people who were not brawny men have been smiths throughout history, and overlooking their contributions has made it difficult for others to see themselves in the field. **Mak Henriksen**, who recently finished their apprenticeship at the Metal Museum in Tennessee and is now a journeyman, elaborates:

“There are ways that our team is remarkable that are relevant today, and that I hope are no longer remarkable as soon as possible. Like, it is remarkable that I am not a man. It is remarkable that I am not over sixty years old. In the future, I hope what is remarkable is the detail on a joint, or that you can't find the seam on a forge weld, or the composition of an object that we've made together. For me, the main goal is to build community and welcome people in a way that changes what we're focusing on. It's important to talk about these issues right now, but I hope that we don't have to talk about them forever.”





Opposite:
Sea Oats | 2025
by Mak Henriksen
Forged & cast silicon
bronze, steel.
6 x 11 x 16 in.

It's a Hook with Large Spoon | 2025
by Anna Koplik
Forged steel
36 x 17 x 4.5 in.

Featured in ABANA's traveling
exhibition

Mak's comments cut to the heart of the issue: discussing identity and inclusion can be uncomfortable, but it is needed to address the lack of diversity in smithing. Consider Elizabeth Brim, a famous American smith whose career has in part been defined by the exceptionalism of her gender and use of feminine imagery. It's a story that's both inspiring to aspiring non-male (and male!) smiths, but also highlights the entrenched stereotype of the male metalworker. People who don't see themselves represented in the smithing community are discouraged from entering it, and without intervention, the problem perpetuates itself. That is why groups like the Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths (SIBs), and this demonstrator team, exist: while much has been done to make the metalworking fields more welcoming, there is still more to do, and it is everyone's responsibility to work together to improve and expand our community.

Many craftspeople spend long and solitary hours in their studios, and feeling connected to a larger community helps sustain our practice over time. **Owen Riedesel**, a recent graduate of the American College of the Building Arts in South Carolina who is currently working at a smithy in Ireland, expounds on what discovering the smithing community has meant to him as he entered the field:

"Working with this group to plan the demo has been really wonderful because it has exposed me to a much broader range of people in blacksmithing. All of us have been doing this for a little while now, and certainly one of the things that is exciting and keeps us engaged is the community. I remember going to my first ABANA conference when I was fifteen, and I was just so thrilled to be given the chance to try things with a bunch of new people that were more skilled than me.

The Stia Biennale last year was another really big experience for me. Right now, I'm in Ireland working at a shop run by a twenty-six and a twenty-nine-year-old I met at Stia, and that's pretty cool. Stia provided a place for all of us to get together, and make and maintain connections and relationships,

because it's good for everyone. I'm really happy to have an excuse to travel here and these guys are happy to put me to work. I'm hoping we can start something like that with our demo at the ABANA Conference.”

Twelve is a sizeable number of smiths for one demonstration, and it is a testament to this group's dedication that they are willing to coordinate such a large group from all corners of the country. However, there are many more smiths they invited who couldn't make it. Anna, Mak, Andrew, and Owen all expressed their hope that this will be the first of many “Future of Blacksmithing” demonstrations at ABANA conferences, and that more emerging smiths will step up to share their love of forging. 

See more of Anna Koplik's work on her website

www.annarkoplik.com

& on Instagram at @arkoplik

See more of Mak Henriksen's work on their website

www.nettlefireforge.com & on Instagram at @nettlefireforge

See more of Andrew Welton's work on Instagram at

@andrewjwelton

See Owen Riedesel's work on Instagram at

@harvestgapforge



*Chef Knife | 2025
by Andrew Welton
Bloom steel, stabilized
& dyed wood
13 x 2 x 1 in.*