



Meet the Owner, Barbie Parsons, Founder and Owner, Barbie The Welder

Describe Your Business:

I am a full time metal sculptor that designs and creates sculptures for clients based on their drawings, blueprints or even sketches on napkins. As part of my growing, diverse business I have also written four books, three are

specifically how-to books describing to people of all ages how to make art with scrap metal, and the fourth is an inspirational book based on my experiences. I also teach welding through my growing YouTube channel, and provide no-nonsense advice to my fellow entrepreneurs. I've been a fulltime artist now for 5 1/2 years. I initially got into welding as an adult, mainly to make art, and everything I did after has always been based on me wanting me to be a full-time welding sculptor.

Tell us your story:

In 2007 I was deeply reflecting on my own choices, living in a subsidized housing facility in Elmira called Hawthorne Court, was very unhappily married, and also painfully depressed.... To eke out a living I worked constantly, obtaining car parts at the nearby Pick-A-Part, then turning around and selling them on ebay.com: this was not a particularly profitable venture, needless to say, nor a satisfying career.

My professional epiphany struck while watching the film "Castaway" with Tom Hanks (and a volleyball), and the moment the scene with the giant metal angel wings appeared I knew immediately that I needed to be a metal sculptor like I needed to breathe! That moment was like a thunderclap in my heart and soul. At the time my family and I were living in government-subsidized housing, barely getting by, so I not only had virtually no money, I also had no garage in which to do welding, and I also had literally no background in art even, but I **knew** I simply had to pursue this sudden dream. After looking around I found that the local BOCES facility offered a welding certification course for \$1,200. So I began saving up that money, even more firmly knowing I was going to make it happen, and nine months later began the course at BOCES. 104 hours of that course later, I still didn't really know what was going to happen, but I knew I needed to weld.

My instructor at BOCES, Jim Ostrum, was incredible: so supportive and such a terrific teacher. So at his urging I sent in my application to Cameron Manufacturing & Design. But even then, submitting my resume, I knew I wanted to work for myself ultimately. Jim took our class on a tour of Cameron, and all the incredible tools they had at their disposal amazed me. Jim said, "Go see Kenny over there, just talk to him." So I filled out the application, and soon was given the opportunity to work at Cameron. After only the first week I was amazed: it was the first time in my life I was feeling any professional fulfillment, and it felt great. I ended up happily working at Cameron for about five years, and during my time there was also able to earn my Journeyman Certification in iron plate and sheet metal. After the first 3 1/2 years of working at Cameron I was able to fix my credit that had been marred during the dark preceding dark years, got a long overdue divorce, and with some help was able to purchase my first house that of course had a garage: an absolute necessity if I was going to keep pursuing my true dream. I saved up more money over the next nine months and with that cash bought my first welding machine. Then, working weekends and nights, I started to teach myself how to make art in our garage. I had sold a couple pieces locally to businesses, a small sculpture here and there. And so after five

years of being at Cameron, I decided to resign from my job, and go for it as an artist. I cashed in my 401K, took out a \$6K loan from my bank, gave my notice to Cameron, and trained my replacement.

September 1, 2014 was my first official day as a full-time artist. This was one of the best days of my life and at the same time it was super scary. My parents were horrified, worried that after everything I had gone through in pursuit of my dream, and all the relative success I was now experiencing, that I had just made the biggest mistake of my life. Despite that, I knew in my heart it was what I needed to do. Nine more months later I had a measly \$35 in the bank, had spent all my savings, and had only made \$50 total. I was horrified. Cameron was so kind to me when I resigned, so supportive, and I could have gone back to that excellent company, but deep down in my heart I knew that wasn't a good option for me. I knew I needed to make this whole "welding art" thing work. I spiraled back down into another deep depression then. I was making art, which continued to bring me joy amidst the darkness, but I didn't know anything about sales and promotion. My postings on Facebook, for example, had no call to action. Soon after at a friend's urging, I set-up a booth at the nearby Erin Wood Festival. This terrific, annual event primarily revolves around chainsaw sculpting wood, with only a tangential connection to my work. I had already paid for a table, and so even though it felt like it was probably going to be a waste of time, I forced myself to go. At the time this was only my third or fourth sales event like this. I was so scared about the money, and distinct lack thereof, but was still super-focused on making it work somehow. My younger son was even there, and helped by staffing our booth, so I could go out and watch the NYS Chainsaw Carving Championship take place. The event I most vividly recall was the "Speed Carving" competition: competitors had one short hour to carve whatever they could in that sliver of time. I was watching them sculpt all sorts of things in wood, with so many people watching, mesmerized. What really struck me was for one brief moment when a deep smile shown on one of the competitor's face. It was clearly a moment of profound satisfaction he felt after finishing his piece, and that magic moment was when I realized that I wasn't there to just make money. I suddenly and clearly understood that I was at that event, in this line of work, to make art that makes me happy. Screw everything else, I told myself. After that profound day I started making only art that made me happy, not thinking about what I could sell, or what could make me the most money. I connected with some chainsaw sculptors there that day, and they were so helpful in directing me to other shows like the Erin Wood Festival. The next festival I went to, recommended by one of the folks at the Erin event, was a festival in Coney Island. This was the first profitable event I had ever attended, and I made more money at that event, than I had the whole previous year! Watching the chainsaw sculptors carving live really resonated with me there. With another snap of intuition I decided to create a live welding show: something I had never even considered before. Honestly, I went to work on this angle somewhat BS'ing people, trusting in my intuition and faith in this new approach with a live welding show, and applying the age old adage of "Fake it 'til you make it". I went around to a bunch of local businesses, created the necessary eye protection (specialized curtains, so viewers' eyes wouldn't be injured by the bright welding light), and shopped the idea around. Out of the blue, Praxair Distribution, a well-known company in Elmira, stepped up, donated four welding curtains to me, and with that set up I started contacting local events in earnest. Telling potential customers that my "regular" fee (a fee I had never charge before, having never performed a live welding show) was \$500/day, but that I would give them a discount. And it worked! Americade, the world's largest multi-brand motorcycle touring rally, based in Lake George, NY, signed me up! And I made more money there than I could believe. From there I was able to attend a lot of similar shows. And things only started to improve from there. I was able to learn about selling and marketing, up until then a crucial deficit in my growing set of skills. In 2016 I had a booth at 48 shows in 52 weeks, and though this kept food in the bellies of me and my two sons, and paid the mortgage, I was also only mass producing art, and travelling way too much. I was happy certainly, and objectively successful, but was quickly realizing it wasn't a sustainable business structure. By the end of 2016 I fully realized I needed to change things up, not depending so much on these many shows out of town. I decided I to start selling more art online, to keep the profits coming in, but not being out of town so much, and spending so much time on the road. Determined to only go to the three best shows- the most lucrative and/or the most fun- I pared back my festival schedule in 2017. At the same time I also started studying how to sell products online via YouTube tutorials. At the same time I happened to make what I thought was a routine wine rack sculpture out of horseshoes. A friend took a great picture of it that I posted on Pinterest and that photo immediately went viral, quickly racking up over 12,000 likes! It was way more attention than any of my many, many other previous photos had ever garnered. Before I knew it, I received an email out of the blue from a book publisher asking me write a book on horseshoe crafts. With so many scams littering the internet, I

immediately assumed it was a load of malarkey, and ignored it. But then much to my surprise they sent me a check, and I realized it was legit! English had always been my least favorite class in school, I was realizing, and now I have to learn how to somehow write a book! This first book on welding art with horseshoes was published in November 2017. Shortly thereafter I came to appreciate that “passive income” from something like a book, was the answer to my latest quandary. That I can write a book, get paid initially, but then also soak up the residual profits the book made over and over again. So, I wrote two more books in 2018, and recently completed another in 2019. This passive income was a game changer for me as an artist. It gave me more financial consistency, something I had definitely been lacking since I began this new career. Then, having built up my online presence, out of nowhere various companies started offering me an exchange of hardware and materials (welding is not the cheapest art form, that’s for sure!), for promoting their products, so I kind of fell into my new role as a paid influencer! Weiler Abrasives, based in nearby Cresco, PA was the first company I started working with this way, and has generously sponsored me since early 2017. Miller Welders and Accessories reached out to me in 2018, wanting to partner with me, giving me equipment in exchange for me helping promote them online. Chicago Pneumatic also began sponsoring me not long ago. I still sometimes can’t believe large, well-known companies like these three are willing to compensate me. All of these new partnerships, my persistent efforts online and via social media, resulted in me being followed by an increasingly large number of people. I started realizing that I needed to focus more on branding and marketing specifically, and also had to develop even more online content. Jesse James Dupree, lead singer of the heavy metal band Jackyl, a favorite band of mine since I was a little kid, was following one of my social media accounts I realized one day. And while perusing his profile, noticed that he also had a brand of bourbon whiskey named Jesse James Spirits. So I reached out to him asking him how in the world he went about creating that product line. Much to my surprise he actually contacted me back- I had kind of assumed he would’ve ignored my request, knowing how popular he is, and how many fans like me must reach out to him every day. Then soon, after only a handful of messages between us, he actually called me, and generously gave me so much help on this form of branding and marketing! A few short weeks later he called again, explained that he had been hired by Harley Davidson USA, the eponymous motorcycle company, to attend the renowned and massive Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, and much to my surprise offered to hire me to make to attend the event too, and create a sculpture for Harley at the 2018 event. So, still kind of stunned this was all actually happening, I packed up my supplies and drove out to Sturgis. I had welded masterpiece projects before, but had never done so as part of a live show. Creating such a vast, complex piece live in front of a massive audience was more than intimidating to me. Despite my trepidation, I steeled myself, set up my gear, and proceeded to grind out 12+ hours every day throughout the festival’s seven day long Hog Live component. I finished this masterpiece in the proverbial nick of time, thank goodness. It was presented to Harley during the Jackyl concert that capped off the festival, and I was even brought up on stage to present it! Me, on stage with my favorite band of all time, Jackyl! It was truly amazing! I have since been fortunate enough to be hired to craft a sculpture for Harley for their 150th anniversary, and once again was invited to present it to them at a Jackyl concert, at their company headquarters in Milwaukee, WI. I couldn’t believe my good fortune and it was one of the most amazing experiences of my life: a moment in time that I’ll never forget. Later on that year I was hired to weld another masterpiece live, this time by one of my sponsor companies, Miller Welders. Only unlike all my other large projects and live shows, they wanted me to weld an aluminum sculpture (a very technique from welding steel), live at the SEMA SHOW 2019 in Las Vegas in Miller Welder’s massive booth. That event couldn’t have gone better; the challenge of crafting an aluminum masterpiece was daunting but ended up being doable. With that successful partnership, Miller Welding recruited me to be featured on their internationally distributed 2019 catalog! I had somehow also now become a model! Knowing that literally every welding supply shop in 2019 had a copy of their catalog with me on the cover was awesome.

This year I’m going to Germany with Weiler Abrasives, starting a sculpture in my shop here locally, and then finishing that sculpture in Cologne in March. I’ll also be creating a sculpture live at Chicago Pneumatic later this year too. And I only recently finished doing seven live sculptures in four short days for a client on location in Phoenix, AZ.

Recently I purchased a CNC Plasma Cutter for my shop, even though I have never programmed anything before, and have used it to create my own line of 3d welding puzzle projects for kids of all ages that I’m selling robustly through a shop in CA, and my Etsy shop.

What has helped you succeed or gain experience?

What has helped me succeed is to look at myself honestly, see my weaknesses, and improve upon them relentlessly. I call this process “non-judgmental self-reflection”, backed up by a tireless work ethic.

What inspires you?

I find inspiration everywhere. I can watch a movie, and before I know it an idea for sculpture, or new business idea, can flash through my head. I even find inspiration in music which, not being a visual medium like my art, can sometimes be surprising! But I'll just be listening to music, not thinking about anything in particular, when all of a sudden an image will manifest in my head, and when that happens it usually also means I have to make that sculpture. I have an uncle that is very sick- he's on the proverbial back nine of his life, as it were, stricken with Parkinson's Disease- and with a friend I made the offhand observation that Parkinson's was “sucking the life out of him” and even that very sad, dark thought triggered a related sculpture of that image to pop into my head. I knew I had to make that sculpture.

What keeps up at night? What are your challenges?

Designing sculptures in my head all the time, even when I need to sleep, literally keeps me up at night. I think these initial ideas through quite a bit before I start making anything. And I use scrap metal for all my work, so every piece is unique. One of my biggest challenges is staying relevant, particularly in the ever-changing field of social media. This is particularly crucial now that this aspect of my business represents at least half of my income. Getting my name out in the world, in front of future customers and clients, and then keeping my name in front of them is yet another endless challenge. Pushing myself as an artist is also a challenge, as it can sometime feel easier to rest on my laurels and just keep doing the same things I've been successfully doing the past few years. Constantly improving my skills is yet another challenge. The recent live event in Phoenix definitely pushed my skills and abilities to their current limit. Welding the aluminum sculpture live was a big challenge too. Whenever a client asks something of me, I always try to tell them “yes”, and then I figure out how to do it. That tendency of mine- to pretty much always say “yes” to a client- creates constant challenges for me, and helps force me to continually improve and expand my skills. In some ways I think of myself as simply a massive problem solver.

What is your favorite local activity?

Fishing! I enjoy all kinds of fishing, whenever I can find the time to do it. Nearby Park Station Pond is one of my favorite places to fish. And I love going down the Chemung River in a canoe, floating and fishing. Years ago, when I began this professional adventure had to sell my boat to help save needed money, so I've not been out on the any lakes in quite a while. But one of my goals is to get a boat again, so I can get back out fishing on our many beautiful lakes.

Is there anything else we should know about you?

I'm a single mom with two great sons that have always been deeply supportive thorough this amazing journey. I've taken every “no” as a stepping stone to success and joy. I can't imagine being happier than I am right now. I enjoy such a great relationship with both my children and parents, and truly love the life I have welded together. I didn't start out fixing my self-esteem, but along this journey it just happened. And it can happen for you.

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