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Creating beauty out of what's left behind

San Antonio blacksmith helps veterans forge into the future

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Special to the Prophet

For many veterans, life after service is a question mark. We committed our lives to something greater than ourselves and became a part of a family few would understand. We served with giants and carried the torch of service handed down to us by legends. We were leaders of the finest young men and women who joined our service and family after us. We mentored warriors. We watched as our efforts and investment were returned in the success and achievements of our subordinates which gave us pride in their excelling beyond us. The title of Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine was more than a name, it was our identity. However, what do we do when that chapter ends? What do we do when the day comes that we have looked forward to and dreaded at the same time and the uniform is no longer our daily wear?

For some veterans, this becomes the darkest of days. We were the hardened steel of our nation's defense, the iron wall that kept fellow citizens safe from foreign enemies. The day after our last day comes and now; who am I? I feel like a sword that has lost its edge or is no longer needed by the hand that once wielded me. I lie on a scrap heap of old metal that thinks it has no purpose. That is until I am reforged into something new.

In a little blacksmith shop near downtown San Antonio one can feel the heat of a 2,000-degree furnace and hear the sound of hammers hitting steel, reshaping what was left behind into something new, with a whole new purpose and new life. The place is the Caylor Forge, the program is called Reforged, and the amateur artisans at work are military veterans.

This program is the vision of U.S. Army Master Sergeant (Retired) Chad Caylor, a retired Army Medic, and his wife Marilyn, a licensed counselor. As Chad began to develop his own skills as a blacksmith, he noticed that it helped him better deal and cope with his own personal struggles from military service. He decided that he wanted to one day create a non-profit organization with the forge and its lessons at the center. The timeline of this vision was pushed up as in 2018 a friend of his made him aware of a local Veteran who was suffering from PTSD and suicidal thoughts. It was determined to move forward that day with what would become the first of thousands of success stories to benefit from this experience.

Reforged allows veterans to rescue a piece of scrap steel and through a three-day process turn it by hand into a knife which they get to keep. Through this the Veteran identifies themselves with the steel they choose to work. They see, that like themselves, the steel had a prior purpose that it no longer fulfills. They see the brokenness of the steel that many of them feel is similar to their own life. In selecting their piece of steel, they determine a new vision for what it will look like and what it will do. They do not do this alone, as they are with fellow veterans from all branches of the military and from diverse backgrounds. Guiding them through this process are professional blacksmiths who have served and program alumni who have continued on with the forge out of a desire to help fellow veterans and continue in a newfound passion of knife making.

On the second day of this three-day program the veterans take a break from the hammering and heat to go into the huddle and learn more about one another. During this period they have the opportunity to share as much or as little as they desire and learn they are not alone. They are also provided with contacts, connections, and other resources that Reforged has fully vetted as legitimate support and assistance organizations. Many of these programs offer hunts, fishing trips, skills training and more, all free to veterans.

Day three is focused on final forming, shaping, polishing, and shining of the knife. The veterans are reminded of the scrap of steel they began

with, the hard work they put into reshaping it into a new purpose and helped to see the thing of beauty it has become. That creation goes home with them and reminds them of the potential of life and their place in it. If they choose, those who have completed the three-day program are welcome to return to the forge and make more knives, with the caveat they must make two, and the better of the two goes to the forge to sell as a means to support this non-profit.

If you are a military veteran or law enforcement officer look them up <https://www.reforged.org/> or swing by the Caylor Forge at 109 W Grayson St., San Antonio, Texas. If you are looking for a great veteran non-profit organization to support they could use your help or material donation of steel or equipment.