

Aurora blacksmith is finalist in Handyman Challenge



By Brock Weir

As a child, Aurora resident Brian Leuthel grew up in King City directly behind a Mac's Milk and a hardware store.

His mother would often give him a quarter to go out and buy a chocolate bar, but invariably he would turn on his heels and return not with candy, but a bag of nails.

It was a natural gravitation, he says ? after all, he did grow up to become an eighth-generation blacksmith who defines himself as an artist. And it is clear for anyone to see he is equally at home with wood and steel.

Canada will soon get to see this for themselves as Mr. Leuthel, 46, has been named one of the Top 16 finalists in HGTV's ?Canada's Handyman Challenge.?

Mr. Leuthel was selected as one of the top four finalists out of the Toronto auditions over the summer from over 200 auditions in the city alone, while four others were each selected in audition rounds in Calgary, Winnipeg, and Halifax.

On the show, which airs Tuesday nights at 10 p.m. on HGTV Canada, Leuthel and the rest of the Top 16 will meet challenges head-on, judged by HGTV Canada personalities Scott McGillvray, Bryan Baeumler, and Paul Lafrance.

?I just wanted to compare myself to everyone in Canada,? says Mr. Leuthel of why he decided to put himself in the mix. ?I have been doing this since I was 12 years old. I make high-end furniture and our motto is if you can't find it or buy it, we'll build it. The more challenging it is, the more enthused I am.

?I am not your typical blacksmith. I think the way furniture is going, it is going to be a mixed media of steel, rock, wood and glass.?

Some might say after viewing his work that saying he's not a ?typical blacksmith? might be an understatement. In his home near Kennedy Street and Bathurst, he proudly displays fittings made out of steel or repurposed barn boards, steel art bearing the Union Jack and, hanging precariously from his living room ceiling, the Fab Four.

A handcrafted wood and steel cabinet would not look out of place in a typical home, but it is accented by a handmade coffee table made into the shape of a paper airplane, and a wall hanging crafted from the side of a caboose, once salvaged from the Bayview and Wellington lot now home to Home Depot.

The magic happens in a studio workshop nestled behind the CIBC near Yonge and Mosley, where he is now working on steel art for a client in New York City's financial district.

‘I am self-taught and I always say it is better because you learn by your mistakes, don't become your teacher, and blaze your own trail,’ he says. ‘Sometimes you don't become successful, but sometimes you find things that others really like. I have been doing this for 30 years on my own [and] overnight success takes 15 years!’

‘Ideas are just trapped inside my head. I sleep with a pad beside my bed and after 30 years, I still run to work. On Sunday night I can't wait to go to work on Monday.’

While he has volunteered his time working for Habitat for Humanity and school-building projects in Africa and South America led by St. Andrew's College, this summer was very much out-of-the-ordinary, with hours spent on his audition piece before cooling his heels outside Toronto's old Lever building waiting to be called.

His audition piece was a furniture sample which showed off his talent, showcasing every conceivable carpentry joint from dovetails to dowels. Not wanting to ‘freak them out’ by doing something too avant-garde, he kept things conservative but added a personal flourish, topping things off with a 1950s Chevy hood ornament.

Evidently that did the trick, and he made it on to the next round. And the next. Eventually making it before the judges, where he received a unanimous round of resounding yesses.

From there, he had to prove himself, being put through the paces building a water tower, but the heat of the Toronto summer presented its own challenges. Yet, he persevered. With the third season of the show in the can, he knows how he fared in the competition but remains mum on just who comes out on top. We'll all have to tune in to find out.

‘There are so many elements, your nerves come into play, you can't sleep at night because you know you have to get up at 7 a.m. to go head-to-head across Canada,’ he says. ‘It is nerve-wracking. I definitely didn't do it for the money! I did it for the fun, the experience ? and it was quite the experience!’