

YARD CANDY:

ONE MAN'S JUNK IS ANOTHER MAN'S LIVELIHOOD

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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THE FENCED-OFF PLOT OF LAND BEHIND KRIS NETHERCUTT'S FRANKLIN SHOP

reminds one of a *Sanford and Sons* rerun. It is a crowded spectacle of rust-covered auto parts, outmoded housewares, metal thingamabobs, and other miscellaneous, well, junk. To Nethercutt, the sight is not an eyesore in the least but a wonderland of creative possibilities. Not to mention future business.

"I turn rust into gold," Nethercutt says with an almost mischievous grin.

And this guy knows rust. Calling himself a "Metal Morphosist," Nethercutt has been self-employed for nearly twenty years. His welding and fabricating background provide him with skills he employed while working for a number of machine shops before establishing his own business, K.A.L. Metal Products, in Franklin in 1991. Since then, Nethercutt has produced a diverse oeuvre of custom decorative pieces, some practical (bird baths, bed frames) and some just for fun. His specialty, he says, is window treatment hardware and iron curtain rods. Though Nethercutt admits that he would love to create more yard and garden art, patrons generally request household furnishings, and business comes first. But even on a slow day, there's no rest for a man addicted to junk.

To acquire an idea of Nethercutt's talents, there is no gallery more obliging than the artist's own front lawn. And back lawn, for that matter. And, well, pretty much all around his house and shop. He is an imaginative force, combining worthless, sometimes bizarre materials into whimsical ornaments that would pepper any home with personality. His billboard is a metallic buzzard atop his mailbox and a robot named Murray on his front porch. If you happen upon his address while on an afternoon drive and see something you love, he'll sell it to you on the spot. "There's nothing here I love so much I'm not willing to sell it," he says. "And if there was, I'd sell it and make myself another one."

Consider the case of the bicycle-fence: Nethercutt constructed a piece involving several bicycles welded together with a metal rider on each seat. The lead rider's eyes are wide and his mouth agape as he reacts to trouble ahead. Distracted, the riders in tow are unaware of their inevitable crash. Nethercutt relates his idea for the bicycle-





fence to responsiveness and community, explaining that Americans must remain focused on the world around them and help each other out, especially during current economical woes. The fence now stands outside Neena's Farm House Antiques in Leipers Fork, though it previously attracted the attention of passers-by along the edge of Nethercutt's own lawn. He says people would stop and inquire about his work nearly everyday, but, of course, something so ingenious ultimately found a new home and new passers-by.

Whether his next venture is a labor of love picked from his brain or a custom, commissioned job, it seems that Kris Nethercutt is as much a dealer in happiness as he is a "metal morphosist." But you don't have to be a homeowner with a decorative revelation or a yard art enthusiast to experience and extol Nethercutt's inimitable talents. He crafted a stainless steel cross casing, six feet wide by twelve feet high, for St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Franklin, of which Nethercutt is a member, as his most recent project. Having sculpted a high-grade stainless steel cross for the church's bell tower in the past, Nethercutt's dedication to community underscores the warmth and professionalism of the artist and his recyclable trade.

Visitors of the Factory at Franklin might be familiar with Nethercutt's work whether they know it or not. He once "turned" two and a half tons of scrap metal and discarded machine parts into a twenty-foot-tall figure of a man, aptly named Rusty Mechanism, that presently stands outside the Liberty Hall entrance of the complex. With Rusty, Nethercutt flexed his metal fabrication talents by cleverly fashioning organs and other human features for the structure. Some of these characteristics include lungs made from squirrel cage fans, a central nervous system of electrical conduits, and driveshaft fingers with U joints. With the estimated construction time of about 3,000 hours spread over six years, Rusty is a feat of industrial art and, as the plaque next to him reads, "a tribute to American industry and to all working people."

The artist confesses that he initially meant his extraordinary piece, originally titled "Clocking Out," to convey a spirit of protest. Aggrieved by the decline of American industry, Nethercutt incorporated a tear in Rusty's eye and a notice of dismissal in his square-link-chain pocket as commentary on the status of domestic labor, though some who commissioned the project felt those features beget negativity and requested their removal. Still described as a factory man out of a job, Rusty received a new assignment: Stand tall as a symbol of resilience and adaptability in a "changing world." Equipped with "a good idea, American know-how, and the determination to preserve and persevere," Rusty, like his creator,



cherishes these ideals while looking to the future. Having forged the recycling symbol onto Rusty's cap, Nethercutt erected a reminder that we can salvage pieces from the past and reinvent them into something valuable and fresh—a nugget of "Metal Morphosis" philosophy for us all.

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