



# *Sister of fire*

Kitchener master blacksmith Sandra Dunn a 'rare breed'

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**ABOVE:** Sandra Dunn forges her creations and teaches her craft at the new Kitchener workshop of her business, Two Smiths (twosmiths.ca)

**LEFT:** Sandra Dunn forged poppies for the 2016 Ypres peace monument.



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is about how pointless war is and how there are  
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Every day, 60 people were forging at the same time.”*

SANDRA DUNN

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BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM  
PHOTOGRAPHY • VANESSA TIGNANELLI

**W**ith a swing of her hammer, blacksmith Sandra Dunn coaxes poetry and passion out of fire and metal.

She possesses as many creative ideas as she does tools in her new shop and teaching facility in a tidy-looking industrial building in Kitchener's Bridgeport neighbourhood.

The engaging, intense woman, wearing jeans and a worn, blue T-shirt with holes that attest to her work grinding metal, is a powerhouse. She's an artist, a collaborator, a teacher, a mentor, a community builder, a humble master blacksmith with international collaborations to her name. (She's disinclined to use the term "master" because "the work speaks for itself.")

She designs and makes the sculptures, architectural ironwork and furniture in forged copper, aluminum and bronze that come out of her shop. Her works are in private and public collections in Canada.

"She's a rare breed," says Ron Doyle, who commissioned Dunn to "help me create the iron sense of Hacienda Sarria," a Spanish-style wedding and special events venue he founded at the end of Union Street in Kitchener. Her "masterpiece" front gate is the first hint that guests are in for a treat when they drive inside.

"She's an artist; she's a mathematician; she's an engineer. She understands chemistry and material strengths," Doyle says. "She's a woman in a very physical game, pounding steel with heat and smoke."

Doyle's friend, Hana Gartner, retired investigative journalist best known for her award-winning work with CBC's "The Fifth Estate," was impressed when she met Dunn at her shop.

"Ron Doyle took me around to her shop and I didn't want to leave," Gartner says. "First of all, how many blacksmiths do you get to meet and how many of them are women?"

"She appeared a bit shy initially, but



Sandra Dunn's talents are on display at the entrance to Kitchener's Hacienda Sarria, a Spanish-style wedding and special events venue.

PHOTOGRAPHY • BARBARA AGGERHOLM

the minute I started peppering her with questions about blacksmithing, Sandra sparked more brightly than her forge," Gartner wrote in an email.

"Who'd ever think that someone could wax so poetic talking about forging flowers from cold hard steel. This isn't just a job. For Dunn, it's clearly a labour of love."

**O**n this day, Dunn, whose short, blonde hair and dark-rimmed glasses accentuate an expressive face, is surveying her new workspace, shortly after her move in April. The 2,400-square-foot space in Unit B at 8 Grand Ave. is for both teaching and

creating.

"I'm so glad I'm here," she says, gazing out the windows at her neighbour across the road, W.S. Bell Cartage with its distinctive red and white trucks. "I love this area. I used to live on a farm near Bridgeport and Bloomingdale."

As an electrician works on a ladder high overhead, Dunn describes her plans for blacksmith workshops. She's excited to get the four forges that she designed in place, for two students at each one. Eight sets of tongs and hammers are ready, made by Dunn and members of her team, Bronson Kozdas, who was one of her blacksmithing students, and blacksmith Aimie Botelho.

A glass wall at the entrance will separate the shop's noise and dust from a clean space for drawing and design work and visiting lecturers, she says.

"There's no good teaching facility in Ontario other than Haliburton," Dunn says, referring to the Haliburton School of Art and Design where she was formerly an instructor for 12 years.

It's a credit to Dunn that Adrian Legge, an internationally known master blacksmithing instructor at Hereford College of Arts in England, with whom she has worked, accepted her invitation to come to Canada in September to teach master classes for blacksmiths that focus on design.

Dunn, who has taught in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii, also offers introductory courses at her shop, including one for women called "Sisters of Fire."

Students need not worry about fitting the traditional image of the burly blacksmith.

"You have to know how to use your body. You don't have to be a big, muscular person," she says.

Dunn is just as busy with her creative ventures.

Chief among them, she's working on a sculpture for the Ion light rail transit stop at Grand River Hospital. Called "Spinal Column," the piece is a bench resembling a spinal column forged from a piece of light rail track. Ten works from various artists



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were selected for the route.

“She’s a very well-respected local artist,” says Kate Hagerman, Waterloo Region’s supervisor of cultural heritage planning, development and legislative services.

“She offered as part of the process to let people see her doing creative work in the studio. She’s very down-to-earth. She can translate very well what she can see in her head.”

Earlier this summer, the City of Waterloo unveiled Dunn’s first piece of public art, “Fish Out of Water,” at its service centre responsible for water and sewers. The sculpture features a cascading copper “stream” – with metal fish swimming upward – that appears to pour down a drain from a pipe suspended in the air.

In June, Dunn finished a commissioned piece in time for Waterloo’s Open Streets festival, a whimsical bicycle built for four

with seats at varying levels.

She forged railings for a house in Toronto’s wealthy Rosedale neighbourhood. For fun, she crafted a kayak out of Sitka spruce in a friend’s garage to take to her family’s cottage at Fletcher Lake.

To focus on her shop, she postponed a July trip to Australia where she was to lead a community project.

In September 2016, Dunn was one of 25 master blacksmiths from around the world to gather in Ypres, Belgium, where they designed and made unique railing panels that would surround the new First World War Peace Monument. The year before, she organized blacksmithing groups across Canada to give citizens a chance to forge some of the 2,016 steel poppies that were installed at the cenotaph base.

“It puts her in a league of her own,” Doyle says.

Dunn’s schedule is in sharp contrast to four years ago when she wondered if she could continue blacksmithing for a living.

Then, Two Smiths, the business in which she and coppersmith Steve White were partners for 14 years, didn’t have enough projects to sustain it. After 20 years in business, Two Smiths was on the verge of bankruptcy.

“It’s a struggle for any business that is making things by hand,” she says. “Everything leaving the shop is a prototype. You figure out the design and how to build it and make the tools to build it.”

In 2013, White retired. Dunn decided to stay in the game.

“I started a plan and read it over,” she says. “I realized it is valuable having knowledge and skills. You don’t need stuff if you have skills.” At the same time, she

learned “never be afraid to dream.

“My focus is not on making a lot of money,” she says. “My focus is doing interesting work.”

First things first, however. She had to pack up her shop on Borden Avenue in Kitchener and find a new location. With Doyle’s help, she found a place on Ardel Avenue.

“We moved 30,000 pounds in 30 hours,” she says. She was especially grateful for moving help from Doyle, as well as Double R Steel and Die-Kat Cranes, a metal working business and a crane company with which she had shared the shop space. They didn’t ask her for a cent in return.

“They said, ‘you help people when you can,’” she says.

It makes sense that people want to help her, says Darin White, a photographer/storyteller who uses bench space at the shop in exchange for photographs for Dunn’s

website and promotions, and lessons in welding.

“Sandra has a super-generous spirit. She’s really open.

“She sets the tone in her shop. It’s respectful, creative, open, generous. She’s an excellent teacher. She is supportive and she has a confidence in what she’s doing.

“Some people have a narrow lens on the universe. Sandra’s is wide open,” White says.

Dunn’s confidence was boosted six years ago when she collaborated with blacksmiths at an international event in Saskatchewan.

While chatting over the anvil, she discovered her fellow blacksmiths weren’t flush with money either. “It’s hard to make a living. I found out they’re all in the same position. It’s not motivated by money.”

She credits Doyle for inspiring her and for giving her steady work, with deadlines,

at Hacienda Sarria around 2007. Among the projects there, you can see the striking metal sculpture of Don Quixote and his horse, his loyal squire Sancho Panza, windmill blades on the water tower and the arresting front gate that she designed and made.

She learned she didn’t need to focus on perfection.

“In the end, he (Doyle) let me not take myself so seriously. I started looking at old ironwork and none of it is perfect and why do I have that idea anyway?” she says.

“She has the stamina and willpower and chutzpah to carry a project to the end,” Doyle says. The big gate is stunning. “I just walk by and stop to touch it.”

Now, in her sixth shop in 24 years, Dunn, 50, is starting to forge parts for the Ion sculpture. She’s also looking forward to making an altar, lectern, four floor-standing



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candlesticks and liturgical furniture for the Brothers of the Good Shepherd whose outreach work she respects.

"I'm most excited about the Ion piece. It's not often that you get a commission to do a large piece of forged iron," she says. The timing couldn't be better as she sets up the new teaching shop. "Getting the commission has made all of it possible."

**D**unn's 84-year-old father died five days before she left for Ypres to join other blacksmiths from around the world to work on the peace monument.

She considered staying home, but the fact that her father was a veteran, having joined the Canadian military when he was 21, helped convince her that the trip was a meaningful way to remember him.

Her German-born grandfather fought in the First World War, she says.

"The peace monument is about how pointless war is and how there are so many similarities among all of us," Dunn says. "It was a really powerful project because all these blacksmiths came together. Every day, 60 people were forging at the same time."

It hit her when she saw photos of young soldiers who had died in the trenches and she thought of her own 19-year-old son, Liam Dunn Kelly, a university student. "Everyone was someone's brother and child. It was very sobering."

Her father's influence is partly the reason she was able to see herself as a blacksmith in the early days when she was looking for a focus after graduating with a bachelor degree in fine arts from the University of Waterloo.

"I never felt as though dad had male or female jobs for us. He treated us as equals. I never understood how rare that is until I

became an adult," she says.

Early in his career, Dunn's father, a quiet, reserved man, flew a Hercules aircraft, the huge, four-engine turboprop military transport plane. He flew supplies to remote



'Spinal Column,' a bench forged from a piece of light rail track, will be found at the Ion transit stop at Grand River Hospital.

communities in the Arctic, and to Angola and other dangerous locations after he retired from the military. Later, he taught pilots how to fly Harvard aircraft.

Her parents valued education. Her mother, with a Grade 10 education, finished high school by correspondence and took Queen's University courses by mail. When they moved to Trenton military base, her mother drove back and forth to Queen's in Kingston and finished her master's degree in German literature.

Her father, who loved literature, read Samuel Taylor Coleridge's works at the cottage that he designed and built and gave his daughter CBC tapes of author interviews to listen to in her truck. Dunn studied English in addition to fine art in university.

Her father was passionate about the natural world and their house was filled with books about plants and animal identification. She learned the names of major constellations. "I have a telescope and I can still name the constellations.

"Even in Ypres, I looked at the constellations and thought of dad."

When she was 20, Dunn took a break from her university classes in winter and helped to work a trap line in Northern Ontario. Living in a small cabin with a tin wood stove, she trapped beaver, martin, muskrat, otter and mink. The experience gave her an even better appreciation of the natural world and its interconnected waterways.

That passion is reflected in her designs. "Copper Tree," for example, is a copper, stainless steel and brass sculpture of a whimsical tree located on a private trail in Rockwood. Its trunk has compartments in which a child can store bits of nature.

Dunn filled one compartment with etched copper plates with plant and animal identification images.

She was enthralled with the work of the late Haida artist Bill Reid.

"I realized I was attracted to the Haida traditions about symbols and how animals participate. I realized what I appreciate about blacksmithing is that it's a traditional craft."

She was in her mid-20s when she visited Artefacts, a salvage and design company in St. Jacobs, and fell in love with the forge. "I was trying to figure out what to do. I knew I wanted to be an artist, but I didn't have a lot to say."

She signed up for blacksmithing workshops and took courses in Canada and internationally.

Armed with forge and fire, Dunn has plenty to say.

"She's fearless creatively," White says. 

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