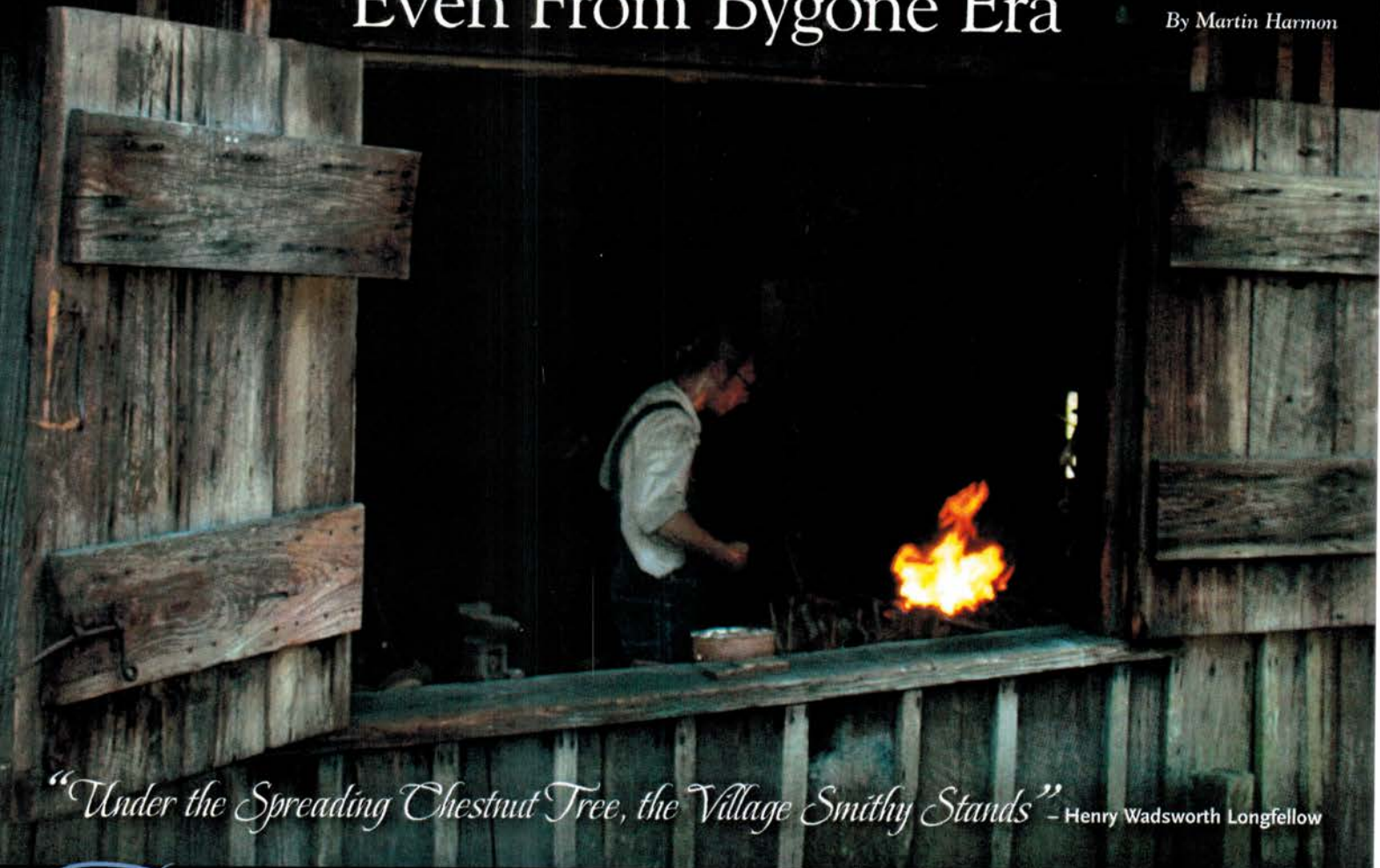


# Vocational Rehab Develops Job Skills ... Even From Bygone Era

By Martin Harmon



*“Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree, the Village Smithy Stands”* – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Thanks to Roosevelt Warm Springs and Georgia Department of Labor Rehabilitation Services, Brian Butler is doing what he always wanted to do. You might say he’s a throwback... a throwback to another era.

Actually, he’s a blacksmith. That’s right, a real live, stand-over-a-red-hot-forge-all-day blacksmith. The kind you would have seen in rural Georgia in the late 1800s.

The place where Butler practices his bygone craft is Agrirama, “Georgia’s Museum of Agriculture and Living History” in Tifton (to quote its website). Along with his step-father, his interest in the “smithy” trade came about years ago during recurring visits to nearby Andersonville

National Historic Park, where regular living history demonstrations are commonplace.

“They both got interested in blacksmithing from their trips to Andersonville and decided to get a small, portable forge, which they found at an antique mall,” Butler’s mother, Helen Martin stated recently. Before taking his interest to the employment level, however, Butler needed Roosevelt Warm Springs.

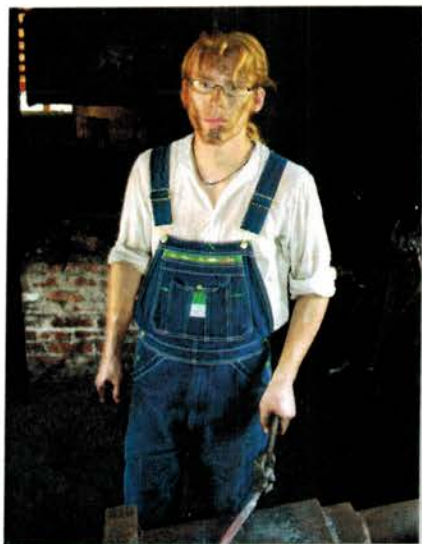
Again according to his mother, Butler suffers from attention deficit, a learning disability and Asperger’s Syndrome, and the several months he spent in Roosevelt Warm Springs Vocational Rehabilitation during 2005 taught

him how to get control over his life, how to make friends and be more open with people.”

“Before he went to Roosevelt Warm Springs, he had real trouble with eye contact,” his GDOL field counselor, Albany’s Gwen Sawyer confirmed. “I was really concerned if he and his twin brother (who has since moved to California to live with their father) would ever be able to improve enough on their hygiene and communication skills to become independent, but he really prospered in the Asperger’s Class at Warm Springs and started to develop the necessary skills to become work ready.”

At first, the closest thing the Roosevelt Warm Springs staff could find to accommodate his interest in blacksmithing was the welding program at West Georgia

Technical College, but that changed the day his vocational coordinator, Kathy Morgan, happened to be driving through nearby Pine Mountain, Ga., and spotted something that resembled a blacksmith shop right off Main Street. Upon



further review and contact, that’s exactly what it turned out to be and as luck would have it, the proprietor, David Cornet, was willing to take on a student internship through Roosevelt Warm Springs’ Worksite Partnership Program.

“I learned a lot working with Mr. Cornet,” Butler stated. “I learned how to use jigs to make multiple replicas; I learned how to use a power (air) hammer to shape metals. I worked in his shop every Wednesday and felt really

fortunate to be there – it was really cool, there’s not a whole lot of blacksmithing jobs out there, you know.”

But it just so happened that one of those rare black-

smithing jobs was located near his hometown (Albany) and when it became available, Butler was a perfect fit. “Brian is one of those fortunate people who has been able to turn a hobby and passion into a job,” said John Johnson, Butler’s boss and Agrirama’s curator. “He’s a very artistic individual and many of the handmade items he’s created are sold in our gift shop and actually subsidize his salary,



and he’s continued to increase his knowledge through attendance in guild meetings and participation in national organizations. He’s constantly improving.”

Now in his mid 20s, Butler has been on the job almost four years and become one of Johnson’s most valued employees. In fact, due to recent state budget cuts and resulting layoffs, he’s currently doing double duty at the woodworking shop in addition to his daily blacksmith demonstrations. He’s truly one of the mainstays at this re-created “wiregrass region village,” a Georgia tourist attraction on Interstate 75 since 1976.

“We want to recreate life in Georgia before the turn of the century as close as we can and Brian is one of the artisans who helps us do that on a daily basis,” Johnson added. “Tifton is an agricultural research center and a prime tourist stopover on the way to and from Florida. With people like Brian, we’re able offer a glimpse of what it was like to live here back then.”



*Photos of former Roosevelt Warm Springs’ vocational student, Brian Butler, working in his blacksmith shop at Agrirama, Georgia’s living history museum near Tifton, Ga.*