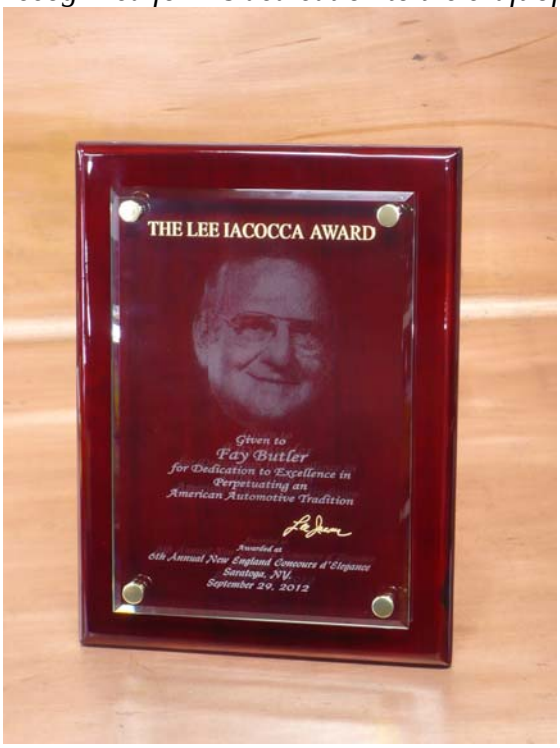
Fay Butler receives Lee Iacocca award

Recognized for his dedication to the craft of metal shaping



By Melissa Fales
Reporter for the Ware River News, Ware, MA

HARDWICK – Hardwick resident Fay Butler has won the prestigious Lee Iacocca Award in recognition for his efforts to promote and teach the craft of metal shaping. Hemmings Motor News nominated and sponsored Butler for the award. "The plaque says 'For dedication to excellence in perpetuating an American automotive tradition,'" said Butler. "My focus has been to help young adults become world-class metal shaping craftsmen."

As a young man, Butler knew he wanted a career working with his hands. After earning a business degree at a community college, he attended Fitchburg State University, earning a degree in Education, specializing in Industrial Technology. However, Butler never did teach in a school setting. Instead, he immediately went into shaping metal fulltime. He spent a year in Pennsylvania making sheet metal parts for cars before setting up his business in Wheelwright, Fay Butler Fabrications /Metal Shaping.

One of Butler's accomplishments has been to establish certain standards in the trade. "There were no standards for the language and the equipment when I started," he said. "I basically had to figure it out for myself just by doing it."

Over the years, Butler's experience includes helping companies develop dozens of concept cars and working with professional restorers. In 1995, General Motors asked Butler to present a program for the employees in their development group at their vehicle proving grounds in Milford, Michigan. He's also done presentations at various locations such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and even in Norway at the Museum of Science and Technology. He worked with the Australian government to help them write up a program to teach metal shaping there. He serves as an advisor to several vocational high schools. Butler's grandson, Jonas Noble, has been working with him full-time since he graduated from high school. Together, they have written two books which have been distributed all over the world.

However, perhaps Butler's most important work is what happens right in his shop on Cleveland Road. Since developing his popular seminar program teaching the principles of metal shaping in 1989, Butler has taught well over 3000 people about material science, elements of compound curves, design and welding. "It's intensive," he said. The 35 hour course is limited to three students per session. "The hands-on experience allows me to key in the scientific information to the students' individual experience," explained Butler. "You couldn't do that with a big group. I'm not interested in teaching to a crowd. My interest is in helping serious people

get on their feet." Butler stands apart from others who teach metal shaping. "I'm known as the most serious professional, with a science background," he explained. "My approach from the start hasn't been to fill seats as much as developing a science-based curriculum that will give these young craftsmen the most impact."

Butler's offering is not for everyone. "Sometimes people say 'I don't want any of that material science, I just want to learn how to use the equipment,'" he said. "That's not what I do. I teach people how to think and problem solve. I want my students to be able to make their own decisions, based on science." Butler said he tries to expand his students' visions of metal shaping. "I try to get people to move away from the narrow focus of just cars or motorcycles or airplanes and see the craft in a broader way," he said.

Famous custom motorcycle manufacturer Jesse James took Butler's course and later included Butler in a documentary on his life. The exposure catapulted Butler's status among a particular demographic. "These young guys, ranging from their teens to early 30s, who wanted to work with their hands, had discovered me," he said. "They started literally showing up at my door to be taught."

According to Butler, many of these eager students fit a certain mold. "It was easy to discern a pretty classic pattern," he explained. "These guys often came from broken homes and were disenfranchised from education. They didn't have much of a science background and were not critical thinkers. They tended to be aggressive and somewhat emotionally under-socialized, but they were smart." Butler soon realized that his seminar was limited in what it could offer these students. "I wanted to do something to help them," he said. "They needed a lot more."

In 2005, Butler established an apprentice program, designed to get seminar graduates off on the right foot. Participants in the apprentice program have to fulfill certain requirements. "They have to write their own program, they have to keep a journal while they're in my shop and they have to figure out how to compensate me," he said.

Butler's approach to teaching these students goes beyond the craft of metal shaping. He literally helps them shape their lives.

"Once I realize that someone is serious and they connect with my way of thinking and what they can learn from me, we take it to the next step," he said. He often invites these students to assist him with the talks he gives at companies or colleges. "Many of them have been virtually discounted all their lives," he said. "When they help me with a presentation, it places them in a leadership role."

Butler and his wife, Phyllis, also serve as role models for social interaction. "We try to teach them how to act in a social environment," he said. "My wife Phyllis is a good cook and she makes them great food. We sit down and eat and talk. I think it helps them see a lifestyle they might not realize is within their reach. Maybe they will take away something from it that will help them not only in their business lives, but in their personal lives as well."

For Butler, joining the ranks of those who have earned the Lee Iacocca Award, such as Jay Leno and Carroll Shelby, is vindication for the hard work he's put in the field. "Those are some pretty heavy hitters," he said. "I'm pretty humbled, but it's not going to affect what I'm doing. I've been doing this for a long time and I'm just going to continue."

For more information about Fay, his seminars and apprenticeship program and his philosophy on metal shaping, or for some of Phyllis's best recipes, visit www.faybutler.com.