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## Portsmouth man looked for a hobby and found his life's work in foundry

By Arleen Spenceley  
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Arleen Spenceley | For The Virginian-Pilot  
Bill Bailey owns Elfinsmiths in Portsmouth, which casts trophies, plaques and other items in pewter, brass, aluminum and resin.

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In 1976, Bill Bailey took a risk.

He turned his garage into a workshop and started a business, crafting trophies and plaques out of pewter and plastic.

“We didn’t know the first thing about making a trophy,” said Bailey, 68.

So he figured it out, and his shop at [610 Virginia Ave.](#) – called [Elfinsmiths Ltd.](#), after a character in “The Lord of the Rings” – is still in business.

It’s a pewter foundry, and the work starts with art – a picture that Bailey creates of the trophy or plaque he’ll create for a client. Then he makes a rubber or sand mold of it, before he pours the metal that



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Examples of Elfinsmiths' work hang on a wall at the shop in Portsmouth, which casts trophies, plaques and other items in pewter, brass, aluminum and resin.

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becomes the finished product.

Bailey has produced the buckles on championship belts for Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier and the trophies given to winners of events at the Neptune Festival .

And “there’s a presidential yacht,” Bailey said, called the USS Sequoia . “Until Bill Clinton got into office, nobody cared about it. We made the seal that goes right on the side.”



Alex Brandon | The Associated Press

The presidential yacht, the USS Sequoia is seen motoring in the Anacostia River, Friday, Sept. 6, 2013 in Washington.

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But what Bailey does for a living wasn't what he planned to do when he graduated from Old Dominion University in 1970.

"Same year I got married," he said.

His degree is in math, and he worked as a math teacher at the school that became Craddock Middle. His wife, Rhonda Bailey, was a stay-at-home mom. Bill Bailey sought a way to kill time during the summers and recalled that he always enjoyed working with his hands.

His father had been a machinist and an inventor who built restaurant equipment.

"He and my uncle had a patent" for the swing-away car tray, which diners at drive-ins used to place their orders, Bailey said. "I was a little boy, and I'd go to work with him. I loved it. He would let me make stuff. I probably broke more than I made, but he was good to me."

As an adult, Bailey thought he could make trophies and plaques if he tried.

"Somebody's got to do it," Bailey said. "We figured it might as well be us."



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Bill Bailey points to a mold at his shop in Portsmouth. Elfinsmiths casts trophies, plaques and other items in pewter, brass, aluminum and resin.

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So he and his wife set up shop in their garage.

"We didn't know where our first paycheck was coming from when we started," he said.

But it came.

He made a batch of trophies for the Neptune Festival and batches of wax seals – 10,000 at a time – to be sold in shops in Colonial Williamsburg. Bailey stopped teaching to work for his father at first and then decided to turn the foundry into a full-time job.

“It was a step of faith to go full time,” he said, and the trials that followed necessitated it.

He moved the business out of his garage to a workshop that a friend let him use.

“He didn’t charge us a nickel’s rent for a year,” Bailey said.

But that landlord died.

“The new guy came and booted us out,” Bailey said.

So he got new digs, and the business continued to grow, until 1997. While Bailey drove toward the Elfinsmiths building one morning, he saw the fire trucks that surrounded it.

“It was burning up,” he said. “I stood out there and cried like a baby.”

Fire officials never determined for certain what caused the fire, Bailey said.

“They believe a homeless person probably started it by accident outside, trying to stay warm,” he said. “It was about 20 degrees that night.”

He lost more than a thousand hand-carved patterns for plaques in the fire – and he nearly lost the business.

“I had a lot of people praying for me when we had the fire,” he said. “And I have been fortunate enough to have a lady by my side who always supported me.”

So he didn’t quit.

His wife, Rhonda Bailey, who owns American Awards and Graphics in Great Bridge, said she didn’t expect that he would.

“I learned very early in our marriage that I could trust him to do what he sets out to do,” she said.

He decided to rebuild.

“When that fire happened, I said, ‘I guess we’re going to find out what we’re made of,’” Rhonda Bailey said. “When you go through something like that ... you have to have faith in God, that his hand is on you. So we persevered.”

Friends and family helped make it happen.

“At one time or another, we’ve had everybody working,” Bailey said, including his father, who worked part time for him for a least a decade.

Bailey continues to work, mostly for the Navy. He often makes plaques for ships, including the ones that hang shipboard, outside commanding officers’ doors. He recently made 400 plankowner plaques for the



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Bill Bailey works on a project at his shop. Elfinsmiths casts trophies, plaques and other items in pewter, brass, aluminum and resin.

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Zumwalt destroyer's original crew.

Forty years into the work, he continues to enjoy it.

“Who else my age looks forward to going to work every day?” he said.

The risk he took when he started the business was worth it, and the lessons he has learned from it are invaluable.

“You have to have faith,” he said. “Never, never quit.”

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