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Dan Neville (left), associate director of Center for Metal Arts in Johnstown, prepares to strike a piece of forged metal held by CMA executive director Patrick Quinn on Saturday during a tour of the center's Pattern Shop. The tour was in conjunction with the Johnstown Area Heritage Association.

'Heritage and art': Hundreds tour Johnstown metalworking shop

BY MARK PESTO
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Hundreds of Johnstown-area residents got an up-close look on Saturday at the Iron Street facility that Richard Burkert, president of the Johnstown Area Heritage Association, thinks could make the area "a national center for metalwork."

JAHA and the Center for Metal Arts hosted five hour-long tours of the space that once was used by Cambria Iron Co. and Bethlehem Steel workers and is now home to the CMA. Each tour included a metalworking demonstration by Patrick Quinn and Dan Neville, the CMA's executive director and associate director, respectively.

Answering questions during one of the tours, Quinn and Neville indicated that they have begun putting down roots in Johnstown in the months since the CMA moved its operations from New York in early 2018.

They've hosted a total of about 275 students in about 30 classes in Johnstown so far, and Quinn said that "more and more (students) all the time" are Johnstown-area residents who want to see what the CMA has to offer. Around 75 percent of the students in the center's last two classes of the year were from the Johnstown area, he added.

Quinn and Neville said they've begun providing communal housing for out-of-town students in Cambria City, within walking distance of their shop, and mentioned plans to open a retail outlet. They also have begun offering internships and residencies.

For now, they work and teach classes in the former Pattern Shop, but they plan to move into the Blacksmith Shop, a high-ceilinged space filled with massive, broken-down power hammers, once utilities such as compressed air, electricity, water and natural gas are made available.

In its heyday, the Blacksmith Shop,

built in the 1860s, was used by as many as 100 blacksmiths to build the tools and equipment used in other parts of the Cambria and Bethlehem mills. It was in use up until 1992, Burkert said Saturday.

Putting the Blacksmith Shop back into use one of the ways Quinn and Neville are working to connect to the industrial past of their space and of Johnstown as a whole.

Another is by refurbishing and reusing the "pallets and pallets and pallets full of hand tools" made and used by Cambria Iron Co. blacksmiths that Quinn said they found in the shop when they got to Johnstown.

"I think we have the potential to create ... a strong image for Johnstown based on its heritage and art," Burkert said.

More information on the CMA, including its 2019 class schedule, is available online at centerformetalarts.org.

Mark Pesto is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat.