

THE WELDING ADVOCATE

Tiffany Orff is a multibusiness owner and prison vocational teacher who shares the word about welding



During her 14 years in the welding industry, Tiffany Orff has worn many hats, including business owner, teacher, and advocate.

The first time Tiffany Orff welded a solo project, she didn't know it would alter the course of her life. She had been working at Custom Industries, a custom suspension/fabrication shop in Riverside, Calif., for a few months when the owner, who she was dating, asked her to weld sheet metal

floors in a body-dropped Dodge Dakota. She was already hooked on shop life but rarely had the opportunity to take the lead on welding projects.

"It went from [being the] girlfriend to 'hand me that tool' to welding sheet metal very quickly while I worked side by side with the owner," Orff said.

Within a year, Orff gained proficiency in welding and became co-owner of the shop. She and her partner then rebranded the shop and moved to Booneville, Ark. Orff went on to get a formal education in welding at Arkansas Tech University — Ozark, Russellville, Ark. During her time at the university, she won gold for welding fabrication at the 2018 Arkansas SkillsUSA Championship, graduated with honors and an associate degree in welding technology, and received the Arkansas House of Representative Award of Recognition, along with several grants and certifications. Orff's achievements are in great part due to her love of welding, but she is diligent by nature; she gives her all to whatever she does, and she has done a lot.

In the years since her early shop days, Orff has become a relentless advocate for welding. She has owned multiple businesses; taught welding at MiraCosta College, Oceanside, Calif.; interviewed with many media outlets; and showcased dozens of women welders via live videos on her online platform, Welding Women Syndicate (WWS).

Orff recently spoke with the *Welding Journal* about her life these days. She now lives in Salinas, Calif., and works as a welding instructor for the California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation (CDCR). She teaches private welding lessons at night, and on the weekends, she



Orff won the 2022 AWS WEMCO award for excellence in welding media for the Welding Women Syndicate.

moonlights at a hot rod shop building cars. Orff also occasionally visits high schools and facilities to teach or lecture students from various welding programs.

Her life revolves around welding, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

A Voice for Women

From when she started working at Custom Industries until she went to college — a period of eight years — Orff did not work with any women. This inspired her to start the WWS, which won Orff the 2022 AWS Welding Equipment Manufacturers Committee (WEMCO) award for excellence in welding media. In addition to being an online space to support, highlight, and attract women to the welding industry, the WWS is an LLC that serves as the umbrella company for her other ventures. WWS has a physical location that is home to another of Orff's businesses, the Exploratory Academy, where she holds private welding classes.

Although she has highlighted many women welders via the WWS Instagram page (@welding_women_syndicate), Orff feels there's still more work to do to bring women into the industry.

"Just because we have the privilege of social media, it feels like there are so many more women in this industry," Orff said. "I still don't work with any, primarily because I'm now in a men's prison. But even still, unless I was hiring the people at my own shop or actively sought out women, there are still very few women in the welding industry. The only thing is we have a bigger voice due to social media and people actively championing for us."

She is quick to point out that welding isn't a male-dominated industry; it's male populated. Reframing that often-repeated phrase can make welding feel more inviting to women, but Orff would like to see an industry-wide mindset change to be more inclusive. She believes that women are still subjected to traditional gender norms and not widely embraced in the industry, evidenced by the lack of accommodations, such as women's bathroom amenities and clothing options, offered by employers.

For the time being, Orff has taken a break from doing live interviews on Instagram, but she is still working on the WWS, with her efforts being more concentrated on local, in-person outreach.

Arcs behind Bars

Lately, Orff has found herself in another male-populated environment: Correctional Training Facility, Soledad, Calif., a men's Level II prison where she teaches welding to inmates.

Working in a prison can come with a stigma, but Orff emphasized that she has not experienced any incidents, and her students are grateful for the opportunity to learn a trade. The group of inmates she teaches is slated to be released in the next three to five years, and they work with counselors in rehabilitation programs, so there's less chance of recidivism, which is also reduced by learning a vocation.

In the prison's vocational welding program, students can earn National Center for Construction Education & Research (NCCER) and AWS certifications. According to Orff, the inmates in her class have high test rates, with scores regularly between 85 and 100%.

"People come in all the time, and they congratulate me on the fact that [the inmates] are so focused on the program because they're making something, they're breaking something because we do bend tests, they're fixing something, or they're helping each other study," Orff shared.

For Orff, the best part of the job is when the inmates tell her they've found a purpose.

"I had one student come in, and he was like, 'Now I know what I can do for my family. I'm going to provide for them by welding,'" Orff said. "I can't even tell you how much satisfaction I get from hearing that because that's what [welding has] done for me. It's given me purpose. I provide for my family. It's supported me. It's brought me up when I was down . . . So, to see them have some kind of hope, and I've given them a little bit of that, God, it's better than anything I could ever articulate."

The student inmates aren't the only ones getting an education. Orff revealed that she learns from them every day. Her lessons have included being more patient, listening more, and not judging a book by its cover. The inmates' dedication to starting a new life has even inspired Orff to host a collaboration with the prison and the community. The event is still an idea, but the purpose would be to shine a light on how the inmates work for their rehabilitation and to let the outside world see what it is like inside the prison system.

"Nobody's making [the inmates] do this," Orff affirmed. "They do it of their own free will."



Slowing Down

Despite having a full plate, Orff's current life is a pared-down version compared to when she owned her shop and was in the process of starting a welding school. WWS was originally housed in a larger building that held public classes, and Orff was working on getting the facility accredited. But the workload wore on her, and she felt the need to slow down and simplify her life. That's when she started working at the prison and moved her business to a smaller facility to focus on private lessons.

"I just took more time for myself lately, in the past few months," Orff said. "It's important. It's something I didn't even realize I needed, to be quite honest. But you give so much to others, you don't necessarily fill up your own cup."

Her goal for the next year is to collaborate with a few more small fab shops to bring more women and youth into metalwork and welding. Although she has lightened her workload, Orff still lives and breathes welding with a contagious passion.

"I really, truly believe in the industry," Orff shared. "It has provided for me so richly in the sense that it's paid my bills, supported my family, given me confidence as a human being, and given me such a full life. I want that for everybody." **WJ**

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