

AGI - Preserving The Gunsmithing Arts

An Interview With Gene Kelly, President and Founder of AGI

Q: How long have you been involved in this industry and how did you start AGI?

Well I have been working in the firearms industry since I was in my late teens. I started AGI in 1993 based upon seeing an increased demand for Gunsmiths in the firearms industry. I realized that there was a growing need to train new gunsmiths on a faster and more efficient basis.



My Gunsmithing story starts after I graduated from Napa High School in 1975. After a year or so of going to college, I was still trying to find out what I wanted to do in life. Being a Gunsmith had been suggested to me by a former Napa High School welding shop teacher as he knew I had a huge interest in firearms. So I went to Lassen College to check out the program and found out there was a four year waiting list to get in. I was told by the senior instructor Bob Dunlap that if I was willing to come up that summer and try and challenge the course I might be able to get in for the Fall program.

So I did and worked from the moment they opened the shop in the morning to when they kicked me out at night. Well, I did pass the test and was invited back to start that Fall in 1977. I went through the entire 2 1/2 year program. After graduating, Bob asked me if I wanted to work for him in his Gunsmithing Shop, because in addition to teaching, he maintained a full time gun shop, so I did. I learned a lot working there, but because I had my girlfriend and family down in the San Francisco Bay Area, I returned there and worked for another shop as a gunsmith.

After that I worked as a California Deputy Game Warden for a while and then started and operated several successful businesses, including a firearms' accessories manufacturing company and a security company. During this time I developed an expertise for creating training courses that were taught entirely on video. We found that they were very successful as teaching tools.

As I considered how to best preserve and teach a Gunsmithing Course on video I knew that the best person to teach it would be my college Gunsmithing instructor, my "Sensei" if you will, Master Gunsmith Robert "Bob" Dunlap. At that time Bob was still teaching at Lassen College Gunsmithing School.

I sat down with Bob and talked about his teaching method. I realized that none of his program had ever been written out, it was all in his head, he was getting ready to retire and all of this would be lost. Nobody else was capable or ready to take over teaching his Gunsmithing System. It was all going to disappear! I decided that I just couldn't let that happen.

His method was unique because he taught Design, Function and Repair; the theory being that you can't fix something unless you truly understand how it works. Anyone else is what we call a "part swapper," someone who just orders and installs parts until the problem goes away without really understanding the "Why" or "How" of fixing it. And that's dangerous!

As students, when Bob gave us tests, they were oral exams in front of all the other students, so you just could

not fake it. If he thought you did not fully know the answers, he would ask “oh, really? Well what else, what if this happens?” You really had to know how everything worked and that’s what made us the cream of the crop in terms of new Gunsmiths. And that is the level of knowledge that I wanted to provide to AGI students, but in an easy to learn, more accessible format, using video.



So I convinced Bob to teach his entire method on video. We began documenting his design, function, and repair course working on weekends and it took over 2 years. It ended up being 108 hours of core design, function, and repair instruction in center fire rifles, shotguns, pistols and rimfire rifles on video. Thus the American Gunsmithing Institute was born in 1993. There was nothing like it at the time and there hasn’t been anything like it since. Today we are still continuing to preserve Gunsmithing Knowledge through the addition of new courses.

The reason that I created AGI was that I could see the huge need in the United States for gunsmiths. We have over 200 million firearms in this country and at any given time 10 to 20 percent of those are in some need of cleaning, repair or customizing, I mean we’re talking tens of millions of firearms need work.

There were a lot of gunsmiths after World War II and these people would now be in their 70s, 80s and even 90s and they have either passed on or retired. Gunsmithing programs were only offered at a couple of campus based schools and most people could not afford to attend them so the number of gunsmiths was continuing to decline.

The first problem is that they could only have a limited number of people in a class. Second, you had to give up your income, travel to some other place and go live there for two and half years. Very few people could afford to do that. So, here we had a growing need which put our freedoms at risk and the “sit in the classroom” style of slow learning was becoming outdated.

So, using Bob’s teaching methodology combined with the video techniques we developed, we created a unique teaching method. We’ve gone on to use this same method to teach people welding, machining, locksmithing and other trade skills. So that’s kind of how the whole thing got started.

Q: What are some of the changes you have seen in the field of guns and Gunsmithing over the time you have been involved?

Well, I think the entire firearms industry has changed a lot over the years. It has certainly grown into a multi-Billion dollar business. However, the main designs of the firearms themselves have not changed all that much. There have been a few significant material and cosmetic changes such as with the Glock but not much has changed to the mechanisms used.

But, things have certainly changed in the Gunsmithing arena. Qualified Gunsmiths are in demand and are making more money. There have also been changes in the way people learn, and I think we’ve helped that change along. Because of the video revolution, people now can learn through distance education. They can learn about Gunsmithing at home, in their spare time, when they want to. This allows more people to get into the industry.

In addition the Internet has obviously changed things because there is a lot more information available. Some of it's erroneous, but some of it's very good. This allows for lightning fast research to find the different things you need in the way of information, parts, and tools. So, I would say the delivery method of information in general has been the biggest change in the industry. The actual work we do, other than the materials, hasn't changed that much.

Q: Do some of those changes seem more obvious or dramatic in their impact in recent years?

Well, I don't know that I would call it dramatic, again except for our teaching style. There had previously been other home study courses, all of them were taught with little booklets, paper and ink, and quite honestly if you purchased a couple of different subscriptions to gun magazines or read a couple of really good Gunsmithing books you would have gotten the same information. Those courses are shallow & pretty lame.

The dramatic change was the American Gunsmithing Institute (AGI) bringing to the market place step by step video instruction. You know we say a picture's worth a thousand words, well then moving pictures with words are worth tens of thousands. Trying to explain something in a book, like how to move a spring under the leg of this particular arm and hook it into here and so on with this amount of tension, is just very difficult to do. But on video we can Show it and Tell you how to do it.

Most people these days are not efficient and effective readers of technical data. But almost everyone knows how to learn by watching somebody do something, by watching video and hearing them describe what they are doing. So, the most dramatic change other than the access to parts and other information on the internet has been our delivery of a video instructional process and home study.

Q: You seem to have a real passion for preserving the trades, where do you think that passion spawned?

I have a really strong belief in this country, what the founders of this country intended and the opportunity they created. I have a lot of respect for people that have served and protected the country to allow us to keep these different freedoms. And, I think if we don't preserve this information, a major portion of our freedoms are in jeopardy.

Specifically, if firearms can't be repaired, having 200 million of them is of little value to the American people. Firearms do many things, not only do they protect the country, they protect through our law enforcement personnel, they protect individuals in their homes, they provide for recreation, they provide for the continuing of the traditions of hunting, collecting, or target shooting.

Q: What are 3 recommendations you would have for someone considering pursuing Gunsmithing as a profession?

One recommendation would be for someone to decide whether they want to do this as a hobby or a profession. If they want to pursue Gunsmithing as a hobby, meaning they are not so worried about "How am I going to make money at this", that's one fork in the road. It will determine to a degree what you end up studying. Even as a hobby, it's quite probable that you are going to want professional level knowledge. Most of us, when we pursue a hobby, want to do it well. But at that point you're not under any pressure to create a financially successful venture.

If you're going to do this professionally, you need to look at not just the learning of the trade itself. That's where many people get focused as technicians; they only want to learn the technical aspect. But, they also need to become aware of what it takes to operate a successful business. That's one of the reasons we've done so much in providing our students with educational material in that area. Real world, not just book, this is stuff I've learned over 30 years of running successful businesses. That's recommendation number 1. Can I learn only by sitting in a classroom, the way I was taught in school, or do I actually learn better by watching videos, at home, doing what I've been shown and being able to refer back to what I've seen as many times as necessary? The footnote to that is speed. I believe in speed.

As you probably know, regular classes are usually taught at the speed of the slowest learner in the class. But our programs don't punish anybody. I believe in Speed Learning, so if you're capable of completing the course in 90 days, going through all the material and understanding it, and completing the certification tests, then God bless you, you should be able to do that.

If on the other hand you're someone who doesn't have the time to focus and it's going to take two years to do the same thing, then God bless you too, you should be able to do that. But my point is that you set the pace. Don't let some teaching style that is structurally limited set it for you.

Classrooms are very limited in the teaching methods that they can support and often times if you don't have enough students in the class, the class is canceled. Many of us experienced that in college. Then you don't get it this semester and you have to wait 'til next semester. So look at your learning style and find out what works for you. Don't be sold a bill of goods that you have to go to some campus, spend a couple of years and learn at the slowest pace.

There is an old mentality out there in the trades that only slow learning over 4 years or something like that allows you to be competent. Competent people are competent people. The incompetent will never become competent.

The 3rd thing I would say is you now need to look in your pocket book. You need to say to yourself, "OK, based on my finances, what route can I afford to go. How Can I afford to do this?" I find that if people ask themselves "How Can I" instead of just saying "I can't", they will find the answers.

If they want to go to a campus based school then they need to be prepared to spend two plus years there, cover tuition and living expenses, and suffer without their normal income. All of these factors need to be considered, and if that's the way you learn best and you are financially able, great.

But if instead they want to learn at the fastest speed possible, if they want to do it at home so that they don't have to give up their job and be away from their family, if they want to do it at a fraction of the cost of a campus based school, then they really need to seek out distance education. And, on the distance education side, I invite them to look at every other course offered and they will find that AGI's is the only course that offers the design, function and repair technique, let alone many of the customized techniques, add on materials, as well as the extended skills such as machining and welding. It's also the only course taught entirely on video. Of course, nobody else provides them the level instruction we do in the area of business skills needed to be personally successful and to run a successful business.

That's 3 great suggestions Gene, let me ask you this . . .

Q: What do you think separates a true gunsmith from a “part swapper”?

A true gunsmith is able to analyze a system, determine what’s wrong and make the repair, often with the existing parts. That means if a part is broken, they can weld it, fit it and fix it. They can shape a new part, they can heat treat when needed. And, whatever they put in there will function safely and properly.

On the other hand, a part swapper doesn’t understand exactly how the systems work. He can see that maybe this part or that part is broken, orders a new part, puts it in and now it still doesn’t work.

Why? Because there are tolerance variations from the parts that are manufactured at the factories. That’s why they’re fitted. Or maybe you have some wear on another part, now you’ve put in a brand new part and the relationship between the old part and new part is such that it is still out of time or not properly operating.

So, what a part swapper will do, (and I’ve seen a lot of these guys that call themselves “gunsmiths”), they will reach in the parts bin, get the next part and try that one, ‘til they find something that works. That’s not professional Gunsmithing. A professional gunsmith is able to look at the system, even one that they may have never seen before, analyze how the system works, and from there make the appropriate repair. And that is exactly what our design function and repair course teaches.

Q: Tell us one of your success stories as a gunsmith back in the earlier part of your career.

Well, I probably have more failures that come to mind and frankly that’s not bad. Because one of the things we teach is something I call *fail forward fast*. Meaning, don’t be afraid to try, and if you fail you can probably fix it or somebody can. You’ll learn from it and the faster you’re willing to go through that cycle of trying, failing, learning and moving forward, the sooner you’ll get to competency and success.

Some of my successes early in my career were when I was involved in designing a submachine gun for foreign export from scratch. However no one designs a firearm totally from scratch, because you are always building on the work of the designers that have come before. Because I had learned DFR, (design, function and repair) of firearms in general, I was able to use that knowledge and transfer that over into the design process.

We created a firearm that was successful and was accepted by the people who had contracted us to design the gun. That’s just one of many things but I’ve also run successful manufacturing operations, and designed firearm accessories and parts from scratch. It all comes from that strong foundation and knowledge of firearms function step by step.

Q: You have been successful in many different businesses. What training or experiences from your earlier days in Gunsmithing do you feel have helped you to accomplish these successes?

Well I think one of the most important things doesn’t come from just Gunsmithing itself. It comes from a personal philosophy. That philosophy is wrapped up in the red white and blue Americana that I believe in. Maybe I watched too many westerns when I was a kid or read too many books, but I really do believe that

you don't ever quit.

It's also smart to cut smart corners, meaning don't learn at the slowest pace, learn at the fastest pace. There is no extra benefit given by taking a long time to learn something. People don't care and they certainly don't give you more interest on the money you put in the bank if it took you a long time to earn it or a short time. So I believe in Speed. Speed learning, Speed earning.

Some of the other traits that I have in addition to being very tenacious are being able to step back and look at the whole project. A lot of people get myopic in the way they look at things, every once in awhile you've got to step back and say, "what am I trying to accomplish here?"

That's one of the things that have helped me be very successful within my relationship with customers of all types, whether in the security industry or Gunsmithing. Another skill is asking the right questions. Rather than focusing on just what they say, this is wrong or this is the problem or this is what I want done, step back and say "How do you plan on using this?", "What do you want to accomplish?", "What is the Result that you are looking for?"

When you take that kind of approach and a bigger view of things, you then make sure you go down the right path. Otherwise, you may immediately select the wrong path and hit a dead end, and then nobody is happy. I apply these techniques every day in business.

Q: For someone considering a Gunsmithing career, what do your courses offer that is different?

I would say that there are a number of things, and I'm going to start with number one, Bob Dunlap. Bob Dunlap is our senior instructor and teaches our Professional Gunsmithing Course. This is the complete design, function and repair course. His philosophy of how to go about the teaching of design function and repair, how he demonstrates it and makes it so clear is what makes us special. So number one is really Bob and his teaching style.

Number two is obviously what we bring to the table with our video production skills. Showing close ups that you couldn't see from the front of the classroom, let alone the back. Here you are just inches away, seeing everything up close, which leads to visual understanding, visual comprehension.

Third, I would say is that ALL our other instructors are real world gunsmiths. They are not just teachers, Bob included, even though he spent a lot of time teaching college, but at the same time, for over 35 years, he has also maintained a full time professional Gunsmithing shop, with up to 10 gunsmiths working for him. He has seen such an incredible number of different and complicated repairs.

Every one of our instructors learned what they're teaching not out of a text book or out of a class room or from creating a lesson plan. They're teaching from real world experience based on thousands of hours of learning the hard way, so that our students don't have to.

Q: How prepared are the Professional Gunsmithing Student Graduates?

Very prepared, our testing process is purposefully difficult. The reason we do that is we want to make sure our students really understand how things work. Therefore our written testing is meant to maintain a high

bar, so when our students graduate, they are going to know how Firearm Systems really work. Our students are so prepared, our certifications are well respected in the industry, and in fact there are some companies that will only hire AGI graduates.

Students also have the ability to go back and watch the videos as often as they want. This is a huge benefit because my understanding is you retain less than 12% of what you learn in the classroom, and I can tell you that the older you get it's probably a whole lot less than that. AGI students have a video library to use as reference material anytime they need!

Q: If you look into your industry crystal ball, what major changes, if any, do you see in the Gunsmithing industry over the next 5 to 10 years?

Well obviously no one has a crystal ball. For 200 plus years Americans have owned firearms. Polling shows the vast majority support firearms ownership. They may be able to create a lot of inconveniences and difficulties but I don't think that as long as our constitution stands, that the right for people to bear arms will be taken away. That provides some opportunities.

One of the most interesting areas we are seeing is that a lot of people, a lot of younger people in the 20-30 age group, are getting interested and involved with hunting, shooting and self defense firearms. The biggest area emerging and which will continue for at least the foreseeable future is defensive/carry firearms. Whether it's for law enforcement or individual use, there is a great deal of money to be made making repairs to and customizing these firearms. I would recommend that someone focus in that area.

Q: What other jobs are out there for Gunsmithing besides your own business?

Well just today I was exchanging an email with a California Highway Patrolman and he notified me that they are posting a job opening for a CHP gunsmith/armorer and that is a phenomenal job. They wanted to make us aware of it because they know of our graduates.

In addition, there are opportunities with manufacturers, whether that is with manufacturers that are importing and restoring military firearms, like Century Arms. Navy Arms is another of those companies that imports firearms. Really the sky is the limit and you can do what you want to do because once you have this knowledge, you can apply it to so many different areas, even outside the firearms industry.

Within the industry there are many different areas and there is an incredible market place with accessories. Accessories have to fit and work and not be detrimental to the firearm itself. Beyond Gunsmithing you can have your own part or full time business. There are many places you can enter the field, including working for other shops.

Q: Can you tell me about your Business Success Training Program?

Well, with our Master Gunsmith course we offer a Business Success Package. Included in that package are audio interviews with various instructors explaining how they handle the work flow and tips they use in the shops that help them work more efficiently. Some of their background stories help illuminate how they got to be so successful.

We include a marketing manual to help the student or business owner market their business successfully. We created an 11 CD series called “The Business Success Toolbox” and that is essentially a “mini -MBA program”, created by myself and based on my many business successes along with April Palmer, a business coach that has worked with over 500 businesses of all varieties.

You need to understand how to create goals, how to get things done - time management, how to handle your finances, how to market, how to attract business and so on. All of that’s covered, PLUS . . .

In addition, we created something exciting, the industry’s first Flat Rate manual. Just like the automotive industry’s flat rate manual, this shows you how to price a particular job based upon an Industry Standard of number of hours multiplied by your shop labor rate.

Let’s say for example that you wanted to put a recoil pad on a double gun and the manual says you get 1.5 hours for that, you would multiply 1.5 times your shop rate. We usually recommend the shop rate be somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 to 80 percent of what the local automotive shops charge because the average automotive shops have a much higher overhead than you do.

Here in our area, automotive shops are about \$90 to \$120 per hour for automotive services. So if you took a rate of \$100, half of that would be \$50 an hour. So let’s work with that figure. In this example you would calculate 1.5 times that, or \$75.00 and that would be what you charge. By showing the customer AGI’s Flat Rate book, it just takes away all the doubt about price, and confers legitimacy; after all it’s printed and national.

There are other tools as well in the business success package including how to get your Federal Firearms License and a lot of other material.

Q: How did you get AGI from the single Professional Gunsmithing Course to the broad line of “How-To” courses that you have today?

Well where we started was a little bit backward in a way, large to small. Remember I said that I thought we were going to create just a couple of videos and I had previously created training videos that were 30 minutes to two hours long. Of course, as I said, to comprehensively cover Complete Professional Gunsmithing the course ended up being a Massive 103 hours long.

So, we started off there and then people in the firearms industry started telling us, “Gee, it’s great you have this wonderful course but there are people that only want to learn to maintain and repair one specific firearm”. So we created AGI’s Armorers’ series and we currently have over 51 of those. These allow people to repair and understand one particular model of firearm, how it works, how to disassemble it, how to reassemble it, how to trouble shoot it and how to clean it. These individual courses run from 90 minutes to over 2 hours.

We also added a lot of specialty courses and most of this came from student requests including: courses on how to build .45 Auto Pistols, how to build a custom rifle or a tactical rifle, how to re-blue and how to do all these other things. Then we had our students come to us and say “That’s great Gene, you’ve got all this

information on how to be a gunsmith and use hand tools, but now I need to know how to use machine tools to make parts, fit barrels, etc.”

We could have done a little course on how to use machines for gunsmithing but that’s never been our style. Our style has been to provide everything from A to Z. So naturally we created a machine shop course that in 30 hours of video teaches you how to operate a lathe, a vertical mill and other general machine shop equipment. I swear to you it’s the equivalent of 2 years of machine shop class. We cover so much and so intensely and our students have been very successful.

Then they said “That’s wonderful Gene, now we want to learn how to weld!” So what we did was we found the best instructor in the country and created a welding course that starts from A and goes to Z including history and safety, gas, MIG, Arc, and all the way up through advanced welding technique such as TIG and plasma cutting. We show people the real secret of welding, which is control of the molten metal puddle

Beyond that we saw the need for additional traditional courses such as how to heat treat parts, and how to make springs. We continually added courses of different kinds to build out and cover the different aspects of Gunsmithing.

Q: How does your personal philosophy apply to where you are going with AGI?

Well a big part of my passion and role here has been to preserve knowledge, not just for Gunsmithing, but for all the trades in general. That’s why we have also created courses for other related trades such as Machining and Welding.

I equate knowledge about how to do things with personal freedom. They say knowledge is power and I agree completely. Applicable knowledge is even more powerful. So people that are not able to do mechanical things are kind of handicapped in a way.

We have a whole generation of people that can do wonderful things on the computer and I think that’s great, but they can’t do anything mechanical. We have even more people that spend their entire life moving paper from one pile to another, and they are very frustrated internally because they really don’t know how to “Do” anything. I’ve heard it said, “You know my Dad was a mechanic, he made parts on a machine, and I’ve got Dad’s old lathe in the garage and I don’t even know how to turn it on.”

Rather than let all of this knowledge slip away, our first priority is to preserve it, and then teach it in such a way that people can learn it quickly. That is, not taking the four or eight years it took to learn a skill back in the old days. Now with our courses it only requires days and weeks to learn these same skills.

Then they can apply these skills to their own ends, wherever they are, whatever industry or situation that they are in, that’s what we are about. To me it all boils down to personal freedom, but you have to take the step of saying I’m responsible individually for teaching and improving myself.

Don’t wait for somebody else to do it, don’t wait for somebody else to hand it to you or fund it. Choose to do what you want to do, get the knowledge you need, then move on creating your own personal success!!