When Alisa Roe enrolled in an oxyacetylene welding class at Rock Creek in 2005, she was instantly humbled. “I wasn’t very good at it,” she says with a laugh. What the 1979 art history graduate lacked in skill, however, she made up for in determination. She retook the non-credit class that fall with an eye on metal arts, and she immersed herself in a form of gas metal arc welding. “I loved it. There was no turning back.” And although, by her own admission, her ideas were beyond her original skill level, she began to design large metal art pieces.

“I originally had no idea what was involved in welding,” she said. But she proved herself a quick study. “Each weld requires the metal shape being cut, then the edge prepared to a bevel, tacked into place, welded and finally ground flush.”

Bell hangers, gates and deck panels were among the early pieces Roe made. Under the direction of PCC instructors Danny Merrick and Kevin Longueil, she created a circular fire-pit of powder-coated mild steel. Titled “Interconnected,” the piece featured five ethnic faces from around the world tentatively woven together, with the implication that we are all part of the same world. Once she completed that project Roe, with Longueil’s help, redesigned the underlying framework so that each structure consisted of eight individually decorated flat panels. This resulted in two more fire pits, “Evolution” and “Irony.” Though Roe believes she could have sold fire pits as a career, she opted to explore new ideas.

Roe had long been fascinated by the African elephant and, as her 50th birthday approached, she booked a trip to Tanzania, which included a two-week safari. During the trip, her group spent time with an elephant herd, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that became the inspiration for her most recent sculpture, “August Trunk,” a life-sized elephant of mild steel, its one flank solid, the other one skeletal. While on safari, Roe approached her subjects first as an artist and then as a humanitarian. “An elephant herd, (from) the very young to (the) very old, is a scaled repetition of shapes and textures,” she says. But, as she also suggests in her artist’s bio, “If the elephant is allowed to represent the continent of Africa, then … ‘August Trunk,’ perhaps asks the viewer to consider, and respond to, the immense environmental, political and health issues facing many of the countries there.”

“August Trunk” evolved over 18 months in the Rock Creek welding shop.

When the elephant piece was completed, another PCC instructor, Jim Jeffery of the Rock Creek auto-body department, clear-coated it as part of a growing collaboration between the welding, art, and auto-collision departments at PCC.

Before the final clear-coating, however, Roe submitted the sculpture for juried selection by the prestigious Lake Oswego Gallery Without Walls. The sculpture was selected, one of two metal sculptures fabricated by PCC students. The second sculpture, made of steel and titled “Billy Chinook,” features basalt columns lit from the bottom by a hidden solar light; it was made by established sculptor and jeweler Nicky Falkenhayn, who also takes non-credit welding classes at PCC. Both pieces will be on display in downtown Lake Oswego.

Meanwhile Roe resumed classes at PCC this fall, where she will concentrate on gas tungsten arc welding. This will allow her to work in steel, and to try smaller scale projects, which she admits will be a new challenge for her. Roe, who poured all her passion into home and family for 26 years after college, says she is now interested in a career as a metal artist, weaving her social conscience in with her art. However, she says the ultimate goal is that “welding remains fun.”