

Profile

Blackbear Signworks

Bo Laveault and Michael Thomes, co-owners
Saco, Maine

Blackbear Signworks is in the midst of a transition—founder Bo Laveault is turning the business over to his nephew Michael, who has worked with him for nearly 20 years. SignCraft talked with Bo about how the shop came to be and where it is today.

I've been in marketing and production most of my life. I've worked for a number of ad agencies and also as a freelance graphic artist. I never really enjoyed it—too much



corporate, too much boardroom. I couldn't tolerate the suits anymore, so when I sold my first big sign contract to a hospital, I left the design firm to my partner and opened my own

workshop. I never looked back. That was 27 years ago.

Today it's the four of us here, and we're all family. We don't have a salesman, and we're the only sign company I know of that doesn't

put its name on its product. When somebody asks, "Wow, who made that?", and the answer is Blackbear, we've won again.

My customers are my sales force. We're the workforce, and we just do what we do. My clients and I may not always see eye to eye, but the end result is always a pleasure. We don't put on airs, and we don't treat people like they're stupid.

For us, it's the work that's most important. I'm very much into making a good product. We can get consumed by it some days. I haven't taken a real vacation for 25 years. If you're looking for me, you'll find me chained to this desk.

These photos show a pretty diverse range of work, but we not only build them, we service them and do maintenance on all types of signs. We turn out a lot of work.

These kids who work with me are amazing. They're certified welders, they're certified painters through Matthews Paint Co. [www.matthewspaint.com] and 3M, and Michael is a licensed electrician. They all walked into this shop with no background in sign making, but possessed personal skills that make them

Website:

www.blackbearsignworks.com

Ages: Bo, 65; Michael, 38

Staff: Bo, his nephews Michael Thomes, Randy Charland, and grandson Christopher Archibald

Shop size: 4,000 sq. ft.

Graphics equipment:

Roland SP300i printer/cutter

Crane truck:

42-ft. Altec with 800-lb. material handler



3-by-6-ft. carved SignFoam HDU board [www.signfoam.com]. "Almost everything we do is finished with Matthews Paint," says Bo. "It's hard to beat that finish."

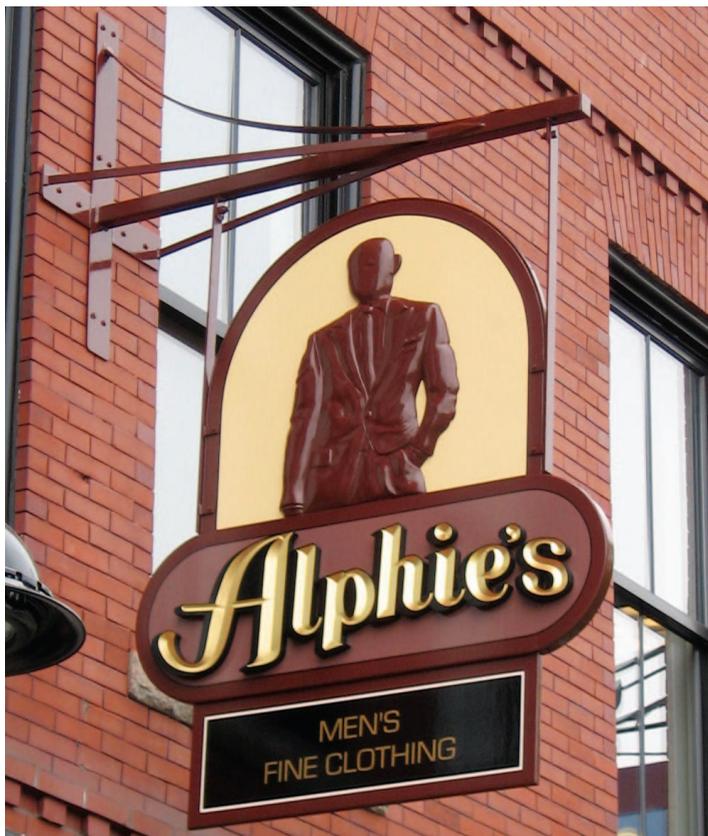
unique. Today I would put them up against anybody on any day, in any capacity. The beauty of our product has come around to the point where it's a combination of everyone's talents.

When it comes to staff in this day and age, you're often starting off with someone relatively young who walks in and says he wants a job. You have to understand that in most cases, he doesn't want a job. He doesn't want to learn. He wants the SUV, big dollars and he doesn't want to get dirty.

As shop owners, it's basically up to us to build our own people. So if you're going to invest in somebody, you might as well invest in family. I have no question that any one of these



4-by-4-ft. HDU board, overlaid plywood and aluminum. "This is the only Merry Maids sign that has been approved by corporate that is outside their norm. When I heard what they did—clean houses—I immediately thought of a house."



48-by-40-in. carved HDU board, aluminum and overlaid plywood with 23k gold leaf on *Alphie's*



28-in. hand carved HDU board

boys is capable of going anywhere, on any given day, and be employed.

To succeed, what you do every day has to be your passion. Otherwise it's just a job.

What I design, the boys build. And it doesn't seem to bother them what I design. It works because I always design something that is buildable and suits the location where it's going. We always do a site survey before we start designing; it's just part of the process.

What drives business is money, but the focus should be on the product and giving people what they paid for. Every sign that I've ever sold has been affordable. I've never put anyone out of business because they spent too much on their sign.

There's no reason why quality work can't be done at a reasonable price. After all, when our customers stay in business, we get to stay in business.

In nine months I retire, and Michael, my nephew, is taking over. He tells me I can keep my same hours and do my same job for my same pay, and he'll just own it.

I remember seventeen years ago, calling my

brother-in-law who is a carpenter and saying, "Herbie, I need you to fire Michael." His answer was, "What? He's my son, he's my workforce."

I answered him, "Yeah, I understand, but I need you to fire him. I need him here."

Michael called me that night—after he got "fired"—and I told him to pack a bag because we were going on the road. The next morning he shows up with a paper bag with all his stuff in it, carrying an old pair of worn-out Carhartt coveralls. I told him we'd be back in three days, and that we were going to put up some signs.

We traveled three hours in a snowstorm and had to put 3-ft. letters up on a building, three stories in the air. I explained to Michael what we were doing, and how we would go about it.

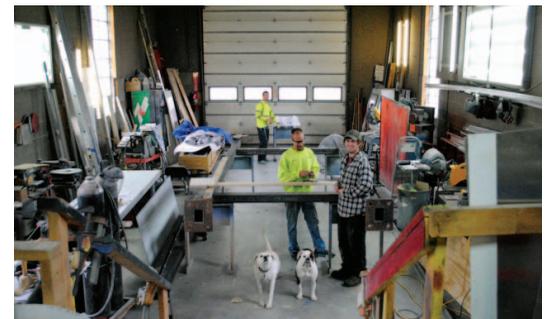
We got to the site and Michael put on his coveralls. I noticed the left leg was ripped all the way to the crotch.

I asked him, "Michael, what the hell good are those?" and he told me that they still kept his right leg warm.

I told him that if we could get the job done in the next four hours, I'd buy him a new pair of Carhartts. I knew this was going to work when



Randy (left) and Michael in the shop, assisted by shop dogs Izzy, Dash and Deni



The shop includes a 50-ft. bay. That's Randy in the back, Michael in the center and Christopher to the right.



22-by-20-ft. HDU board, aluminum composite and rough sawn timbers



10-by-14-ft. sign with LED-illuminated acrylic letters in aluminum cabinet and copper-topped roof; skirt is cedar.



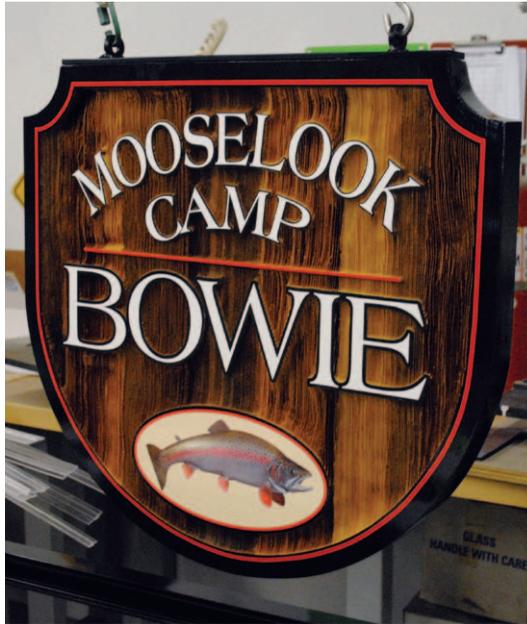
40-by-40-in. HDU board sign on custom aluminum bracket. "This is double-sided," says Bo, "and it's exactly the same on the other side so everything lines up."



36-by-24-in. HDU board



48-by-40-in. sign with LED-illuminated acrylic letters in aluminum cabinet on aluminum posts



36-by-26-in. sandblasted cedar

he turned around, smiled and asked, "What if I do it under two?"

I told him I'd throw in the biggest prime rib we could find. We were done under two hours.

So, that's Michael. He earned his place here, and I'm not going to sell the shop to him; I'm giving it to him. The passing of the chisel, the way I see it.

Then there's Randy and my grandson, Christopher. Randy does it all, too. He and Michael can really handle any work you throw at them. Christopher has only been on board four months. He's primarily Michael's helper.

My youngest son, Eric, started here when he was only nine. By the time he was 12 he could stick weld as good as anybody. He was impressive to watch. He was just as good at laying gold leaf. He went on to graduate from George Mason University.

We were hoping he'd come back to the shop, but he had another path. He enlisted—I guess it's a lot less discipline than the sign shop. [Laughing.] Eric is currently serving with the



36-by-26-in. carved cedar with 23k gold leaf graphics



3-by-4-ft. HDU board with router-cut inset letters and printed graphics and a custom bracket



Full wrap on tank, fenders and tool boxes; graphics are reflective film. One of 35 vehicles done for Cash Energy.

82nd Airborne.

Most of our work is done within 60 miles of our shop, but we have signs on 5th Avenue in New York, Washington, DC, Fairfax, Chicago, Texas, Florida, Canada—and one that we know of in Sweden. We've done all kinds of projects, from 105-ft. cranes to a helicopter. It doesn't matter to us as long as it stays still long enough for us to get it done.

We're PC-based for our design work, and we use FlexiSign. Until recently we had only Macs, because I think they're far better suited for design work. But we had a Mac go down, and we had to replace it with a PC to get Flexi to run. So I've had to learn how to run a PC.

I started out with all the traditional tools and methods, and we managed to get some pretty nice work out. People keep telling me that computers are the answer. I keep asking what the hell the question was. [Laughing.] **SC**

—From an interview with John McIltrout



48-by-30-in. carved HDU board with 23k gold leaf graphics



5-by-8-ft. HDU board sign face wrapped with aluminum; beach sand is smalts.



HDU board wrapped with aluminum, on aluminum posts with PVC caps