

# Ron Kim

Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

**W**hen I got back from Vietnam I went to work for Sears doing display work. On the side, I started painting murals, often in discos. Before long, people were asking me to paint a sign here and there so I was doing some signs. Before you knew it, I didn't have time for Sears anymore.

Faye, my wife, would go out a couple days a week and cold canvas. She would bring back a few jobs. Soon she only would go out once a week then once a month, then she didn't need to go at all. We had a steady flow of work. We've been lucky because we haven't looked for work for 28 years.

You know how it is—you get a deposit for a job and use the money to buy a \$300 pickup.



When you sell the next decent job, you buy some tools. You work out of the house until the neighbors start complaining. Then you rent a little shop somewhere, and it just keeps growing from there.

In the mid-90s we started doing some of the theme projects. It was interesting work and customers liked what we did, so we went more in that direction. Ten years later we were getting pretty creative. New materials like SignFoam HDU board [[www.signfoam.com](http://www.signfoam.com)] and aluminum composite material were coming along, and they let us do some pretty interesting things.

**Word-of-mouth magic** Today, we really focus on the more creative type of work. We have quite a bit of it out there, and that brings us a lot of referrals. It's hard to develop a reputation for really creative work because most of the time people don't want to spend the money to get a really effective sign. That's why they usually have to see what you can do and see how they work before they'll consider it. But when you get a job out there like Mirror Maze on the New Jersey boardwalk and people see the impact that it has, they start calling you. They want something that tops that. It spreads like wildfire.

If you do work that makes an impression, you start getting phone calls. So you do a

**Shop name:**

Signworks

**Shop size:** 4000 sq. ft.

**Staff:** 9

**Age:** 68

**Graphics equipment:**

Gerber Sabre router

Mimaki JV3-160S printer

Mimaki cutter

ArtCam CAD/CAM software

CorelDraw

Photoshop

**Online:**

[www.signworksmb.com](http://www.signworksmb.com)



Prismatic carved SignFoam high-density urethane board [[www.signfoam.com](http://www.signfoam.com)] letters on curved aluminum tubing. Background panel is CNC carved HDU over a frame of square aluminum tubing, and is 4-by-12-ft. overall.



HDU letters on a 3-by-8-ft. background of pecky Cypress boards. The pelican graphic is a hand-carved HDU board panel.



The Tiki totems are 3-by-30-ft. and carved from EPS foam that was coated with Magic Smooth epoxy then sprayed with a stucco finish. The letters and sign panel are HDU over an aluminum frame, and are 18-ft. wide overall. The surfboards are HDU board, and the wave is also EPS foam.



The 10-ft.-diameter skillet is aluminum with HDU for the handle, all sprayed with stucco for the texture. The letters are HDU board, and the saw blade is aluminum.



Letters are HDU board, as is the oval panel, mounted to an aluminum frame with a spray stucco finish. The sign is 4-by-12-ft. overall.



"This one has emoji faces on it that spin around," says Ron. "That sort of thing really works out well—it brings the people into the store. Everything's a little screwy on the sign so we twisted up the light brackets, too." LED channel letters on an 8-ft. HDU background over an aluminum frame



Router-carved HDU prismatic letters on a 10-ft.-wide router-carved HDU panel on an aluminum frame



"Things like the 22-ft. spacecraft for Laser Maze get attention," says Ron. "It was used on another business for two years where it was coming out of the wall. They closed and we got it back, then sold it to this attraction in New Jersey. It's all lit with LEDs, and we have turbo lights behind that Lexan. The back wall is carved SignFoam HDU over an aluminum frame. We routed the texture into that, then have LED lights on the back of the letters that light up that back wall. The alien characters are 8-ft. and 10-ft. tall. The alien in the space capsule was cut on the router and is about 24 in. deep. The rest of the space capsule is all SignFoam HDU."

mini golf in Seaside Heights, New Jersey, then the next thing you know someone wants you to do one on Long Beach Island. Or you do a great-looking sign for a store, then the shop that opens next door calls you. Then someone across town sees it and wants one, too. It's word-of-mouth.

We want to do things that are different. We don't want to do work that you can get most anywhere else. We enjoy what we're doing. We do work all over the US, and have sent work to Saudi Arabia, El Salvador, Norway and Canada.

**Selling themed signage** When people call, the first thing I do is have them go to the website and look through our work. It does tend to be a little more expensive because it's a lot more involved than most sign work. Once they see what we do, we can talk about their work.

Signs like this can be pretty pricey, but I work with them. They tell me what their budget is, and we see what we can do. In almost every case, you can trade them up a little bit as they see what you can do. Next thing you know they get what they want and need, and I get to do what I like to do.

There's some sign work that we don't do. We don't do channel letters, for example, unless we can do them with some sort of theming.

My goal is to get customers into the stores—it's not really just to sell a sign to someone. I want to generate traffic for them. It works—you'd be surprised how well the signs perform.

If they want my work, though, they have to pay the price. I can't do what I do for any less. If someone sends me a drawing or picture of something they want but I don't like it, I won't do it—even if they put the money on the table. I try to explain why I don't like it and why something else would work better. But if I can't convince them, I won't do it. You just can't make yourself do something that you know isn't going to work.

But not every job we do is fancy and custom. We have regular clients that just don't need that look. We do a lot of residential development work, from the entry signage on. We've done 700 mailboxes for one of those neighborhoods. But we target the exceptional projects. That's who we really want to work for.

### The staff and the shop

I usually do the design but I have my hands in everything. I retired three years ago but I'm still at it. The older you get, the time goes faster and faster. But you have to keep doing your stuff. I'm a skydiving instructor and I like to fish. You have to get out of the shop sometimes. If you have good people, you can do that, and we have good people here.



Prismatic HDU board letters and graphic on a 5-by-8-ft. HDU background, with turbo lights (commonly used for carnival and fairground amusement lighting) in the border



2-by-3-ft. carved HDU faces with threaded rods embedded between them for mounting



3-ft.-diameter carved HDU panel with HDU letters. Threaded rods were embedded in the HDU for mounting.



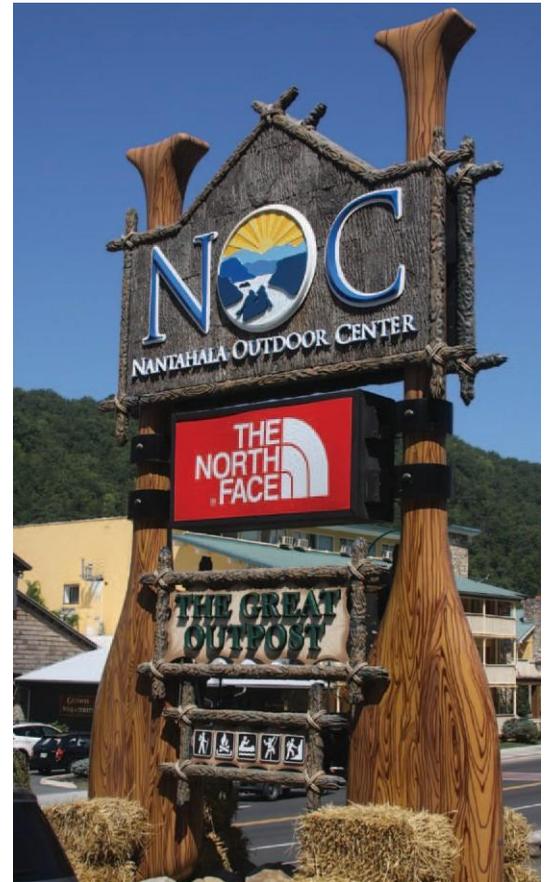
CNC router carved HDU letters and graphics over an aluminum frame, with aluminum leaves in the background. The sign is 6-ft. wide. All the 3D carving was designed in ArtCAM software [www.artcam.com].



Letters are HDU board over black aluminum backer; the hat is 4-by-4-ft. and fabricated from aluminum.



Tara Forest, Faye Kim, Chris Shirk, Ingrid Shirk, Kirt Edwards and Nathan Wolfe



Main sign panel is HDU letters on 6-by-8-ft. HDU panel covered with poplar bark panels [www.barkclad.com], mounted on 20-ft.-tall HDU paddles. The paddles are laminated oversquare aluminum tubing that slid over steel beam uprights.



The bear is 20-ft.-tall carved EPS over an aluminum framework, coated with fiberglass and sprayed with stucco. The paddle is HDU board, and the flag is aluminum.

Like most sign shops, everyone does a little of everything but each person has an area that's theirs. Nate uses our ArtCAM software [www.artcam.com] to set the job up for the router. Kirt usually does the welding and fabrication.

My son, Chris, pretty much runs the shop and everyone does a little bit of everything. He started working here at 15, so he knows it inside and out. His wife, Ingrid, and our daughter, Tara, do most of the painting. Faye runs the office and has the worst job of all—keeping the books and collecting the money.

We just bought land and plan to build a 7000 sq. ft. shop there. It will be much more fitting for what we do now. We don't do bad now, though. For eight people in 4000 square feet, we put out a lot of sign work, and some pretty big projects, too.

**Inspiration and creative materials** The challenge is to creatively help your customer's business. When I first started in the business I would cut out the photos of signs in *SignCraft* that interested me and put them into binders for future reference. When I would start working on a design, I would flip through those photos just to get something to start an idea. I never copied anything, but ideas start popping in your head because you're looking at this interesting work from all over the country. Seeing all those great-looking designs influenced me a lot.

The materials and substrates that are available now help make this kind of work possible, too. I found out about Magic Sculpt sculpting epoxy in *SignCraft*, and we use that a lot. We use a lot of SignFoam HDU board, too. We're doing a lot of fiberglass and now all of our frames are made out of aluminum. And there's all sorts of new LED lighting coming out.

You've got a lot of interesting products to work with, and there are opportunities out there to do creative work that will bring people into stores. It's a lot of fun right now to make signs, especially themed signs. That's why I'm still at it. **SC**

—from an interview with Tom McIltrout



Letters and graphics are HDU board on a 5-by-10-ft. HDU board panel over an aluminum frame.



Prismatic carved HDU letters on an HDU panel over a curved aluminum frame. Oval panel is carved HDU board.



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