

A
Courant
Community
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Section

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SIGNS OF THE T

By **BRENDA SULLIVAN**
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MANCHESTER — The boulder-like texture of a carved sign announcing "Triceratops" could be straight out of a "Flintstones" cartoon. The sign hangs over the entrance to one of the many activity areas at Nature's Art in Salem — a combination gift shop and family fun center.

A colorful, three-dimensional pick-and-axe on another sign leads to a mining area, this one looking like a prop for Yosemite Sam.

These kinds of imaginative and fanciful creations are just the kind of work William Johnson enjoys most when he

and his crew at Identity Design and Display Inc. are called upon by businesses.

"We're artists here, so whenever we can, we use dimensional signs," Johnson said.

A graduate of Paier College of Art in Hamden, Johnson often employs sculpting — and even architectural techniques — in his projects. Many of the company's creations can be seen at the Foxwoods Casino, including two Frank Lloyd Wright-style pillars holding aloft giant replicas of diamonds.

Closer to home, his company recently completed a 16-foot high, Victorian-style, illuminated clock for the Savings Bank of Manchester, now at the corner

of Main and Oak streets. The bank donated the clock to the Downtown Manchester Special Services District, which has been overseeing a downtown façade improvement program.

"I've been dealing with Bill for quite a number of years, since he had his own business. His work is exceptional. He's extremely creative. All you have to do is say, 'Bill, I need a sign,' and he takes it from there. He's fast and efficient, and I highly recommend him," said Tom Matrick, vice president of facilities and security at Savings Bank of Manchester.

Johnson takes pride in hiring recent art-school graduates to work on his projects, as well as those who may not

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have received formal art training but show real talent, such as Istvan Decsy, a graduate of Bolton High School and Manchester Community College.

"His father was a stone mason, as well as politician and dignitary, back in Hungary. And he taught Istvan everything he knew," Johnson said.

Quite a bit of artistry went into creating the 200-pound bank clock, Johnson said. The design of the decorative motif on the pediment of the clock — a basket overflowing with fruit, bordered by scroll work and two birds with wings raised — actually is a marriage of various moldings, skillfully combined.

"Seth Thomas made this type of clock, and a few companies have access to

original castings, but we wanted to personalize this project," Johnson said. They also upgraded the materials from the traditional steel to hand-formed aluminum, which will hold up better with time. And should archaeologists ever explore the interior of the clock, they will discover the initials of the men who created it.

Johnson, a gregarious but down-to-earth man in his 50s, got involved in his craft after returning from serving in Vietnam. Once discharged, he returned to Manchester where he was born and raised. Johnson spent his early years on Maple Street, "just one street over from

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PHOTO COURTESY OF IDENTITY DESIGN AND DISPLAY, INC.

ISTVAN DECSY, a craftsman working for William Johnson's Identity Design and Display, Inc., puts finishing touches on the frame of a Victorian-style clock commissioned by the Savings Bank of Manchester, now installed at the corner of Main and Oak Streets. The bank has donated the clock to the Downtown Manchester Special Services District.

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where the (Savings Bank of Manchester) clock is," and went to Nathan Hale School, he said.

Back from the service, he decided to enroll in art school. "My parents were glad I wanted to go to school," Johnson recalled. "They weren't surprised that I chose art school, because I had been scribbling ever since I was a kid."

In 1972, he opened his own business, Johnson Electric, on Wetherell Street.

While he came equipped with a sense of design, learning how to translate drawings into functional signs was a learn-as-you-go experience, he said.

"I actually started out hand-lettering signs. In the winter, business would drop off so I bought a bucket-truck and started going around town and fixing signs. And that's how I figured out how they were made. It taught me the good from the bad.

So, I started designing them, and it just went on from there," he said.

After 16 years, Johnson decided to sell his business to Art Effects. He continued to work for that company for another eight years, until he got the urge to be his own boss once more.

In 1995, he opened Identity Design and Display Inc. in a industrial park shared with Maaco and a handful of other businesses, at 540 N. Main St.

Business has been brisk, but it is still tough to get ahead, Johnson said.

In part, "it's because I am a stickler for originality and a pain in the neck about quality. Anyone who works here will tell you that," he said, and laughed.

In addition, this kind of work is very competitive. "Everyone wants to get their foot in the door at Foxwoods, so they may put in really low bids. That means, if we want the work, we have to lower our bid," Johnson said.

"When people hear we do work for Foxwoods, they think we're lucky, but they don't know what it's like, working on complex designs with really tight deadlines," he added.

Many of Johnson's clients come to him through word of mouth, from all parts of the country. The semi-circular, counter-like backdrop behind the news anchors for CBS News in Washington was

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fabricated in Johnson's shop, for example.

So much of his work is visible in town that his four children — now 12, 14, 20 and 21 years old — long ago grew tired of his pointing things out to them, Johnson said.

"Still, I cannot imagine doing anything else," he said.

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