

<<< CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

Located on an idyllic farmette near the Fond du Lac County Airport, Jeff's studio door often is open—allowing pets like pigs, donkeys and peacocks to wander in and visit as he carves and paints. Patterns fill drawers and hang from the studio walls, which also are plastered with publication clippings and photos of completed hats, often on their owners. Jeff's wife, Sandy, is nearby, providing in-home daycare for young children, while the Jeff's four children, ranging in age from nine to 15, are in school. Jeff credits his wife for making it possible to pursue his hobby business.

His tools include a special foam saw, scissors, Exacto knives and an airbrush—as well as a top-secret adhesive for affixing some creations to baseball-style caps.

"Of the 17,000 I've carved, I can count on one hand the times I've messed up," Jeff said. "I can always carve and recoup."

Hats average 20 minutes to two hours to create, with special hats for celebrities taking as long as seven hours apiece to complete.

CREATING CONNECTIONS

While 90 percent of the hats he produces are ordered by clients, Jeff also creates gift hats for many celebrities he admires. These gifts have opened doors and forged relationships with musicians like KISS and Ted Nugent, as well as sports figures like Troy Aikman and the crews of CBS Sports and FOX Sports. He also has a long list of celebrity clients.

"When Ted Nugent was on MTV's Cribs, he showed his house and toys," Jeff recalled. "He said he had the coolest collection of hats, and put on my hats. So many things like that happen. It's exciting to see and fun for me."

Jeff's largest hat creation may have been for his highest-profile client: the Republican Party contacted him to make a hat for then-President George W. Bush. The completed hat was four feet wide and three feet tall, and featured an elephant crushing a donkey in its hand.

Some Big Guy Hat clients order hats because they specifically want to be noticed at a sporting event, by other spectators and by the

media. It often works. "That's the biggest thing for me," Jeff said. "When people wear the hats and get exposure, it makes them happy. 'Get big and bold, you're never too old.' That's what I say about Big Guy Hats."

Jeff himself draws media attention when he wears his creations, particularly his show-stopping "Frozen Tundra Man" hat, complete with facial "focles." He has been featured by numerous media outlets, including USA Today. The Associated Press recently contacted him to put a release on a photo featuring Jeff in a Clay Matthews hat, which would make it available for commercial use and could generate income for him.

GRASSROOTS MARKETING

Apparently Jeff is in it for the art—for the satisfaction of creation—more than for money. "My motto is to make \$20 on every hat I carve," he said, with prices for his hand-made hats averaging \$28 to \$65.



RIGHT: Jeff Kahlow, owner of Big Guy Hats, holds up a photo taken by an Associated Press photographer at the 49ers vs. Packers wearing the same hat.

BELOW: Jeff Kahlow works on a hat by placing a tapper onto the leg while in his shop.

Allen Andrews/The Reporter.



At left, Jeff poses with Harrison Ford, sporting his Indiana Jones hat, and at right, Gene Simmons of KISS imitates his hat, displaying his famous expression./Submitted Photo

You Love Your Family ... and so do we!

This is why we don't want to work with them during a difficult time, which makes pre-planning your burial arrangements of the utmost importance

We can assist you with these and many more tough decisions

- In-ground Full Body or Cremation Old or New Grounds Monument size, color & design
- Mausoleum Full Body or Cremation Inside or Outside Garden or Chapel Mausoleum

Call Rae Nell at 920-922-4543

Rienzi Cemetery & Chapel Mausoleum

N6101 Hwy. K • Fond du Lac, WI 54937
BEAUTIFUL • HISTORIC • ALL-FAITHS • Since 1845
rienzi@tds.net • www.rienzicemetery.com facebook

Make your final resting place part of Fond du Lac history at Rienzi



"Everyone says 'You're dirt cheap. You don't charge enough,'" Jeff acknowledged, noting he raises prices only when foam costs increase. When orders come in from some parts of the county anticipating higher prices, customers will decide to order several hats.

About half of hat orders come from the Midwest, but Jeff fields calls from all over the world—all without traditional advertising. Jeff signs each hat and stamps it with his phone number, and he also has a website, but most clients find him after seeing someone wear a hat and asking about it.

These affordable creations are featured in the Packer Hall of Fame, which cites the hats as "a significant part of the Green Bay Packer story."

"The organization up there appreciates what I do," Jeff said.

Experience may contribute to Jeff's low-key business approach.

An invitation to appear on ABC's Shark Tank in 2011 concluded with a business deal and 50/50 partnership offer from Mark Cuban and Daymond John.

"I would be their prototype hat-maker, while they deal with the marketing and production," Jeff said. "After I left Hollywood and returned home, I thought my life was about to change! They wanted prototypes A.S.A.P., so I created over two dozen for them and shipped them out priority mail. Four weeks later, all my boxes re-

turned back to me with half of the hats missing. After sending countless emails and phone messages, they never returned any of them. I never heard back from them. End of story."

Still, Jeff currently is looking into possibilities to mass produce one specific hat design. But, even if this pursuit is successful, he won't stop his hand creations.

"It never feels like work," he said. "I'd do it all the time. You know, you'll never work a day in your life if you love your work. I got huge enjoyment from doing presentations in schools, sitting in front of a group of kids and telling them no matter how crazy your idea, if you really love something, you can be successful. I can't wait to create." ☺