

Follow the Fish: Locally made way-finding signs point to Walleye Weekend fun

It isn't Walleye Weekend without a fish story. But this one happened before a single rod was cast. It's not about the one that got away—in fact, it multiplied—and it's a keeper: A "school" of nearly 60 metal fish-shaped way-finding signs that will direct festival goers to the wide variety of activities happening throughout Lakeside Park during the three-day family event.

Similar to the annual namesake fishing tournament, this fish story features a team: local high school tech education students, an international business focused on water sports, and the vision of Fond du Lac Festivals Executive Director Leanne Doyle.

"I wanted signs that we could reuse and that were clearly related to the festival," Doyle said of her idea for the metal fish. "And, I am always thinking about connecting people in our community. I had a strong belief that students could make the fish, and it could be a learning process with festival sponsor Mercury Marine, who employs a large number of residents in our community. So, I called North Fond du Lac Superintendent Aaron Sadoff and Adres Gonzalez, head of Mercury Marine human resources, and described my idea. Both said yes, and they started working together."

"When Leanne came to us, we thought it was a really great idea," Gonzalez said. "We could do something for the students and continue our partnership with the community."

Sadoff immediately was keen on the collaboration perspective.

"Working together to utilize all of our community's talent and strengthening relationships is huge," Sadoff said. "It's all about people and working together. We want to promote our kids and show their talents to the community."

And he knew he had the teacher to lead students through the project: Technology Education Instructor Paul Helm. New to the North Fond du Lac staff, but with 33 years of teaching experience across both middle and high school in Oakfield and Fond du Lac, Helm had already stepped up to help launch the in-school metal fabrication business Oriole Enterprises, the newest of nine functioning student-operated businesses at Horace Mann High School. These varied businesses provide students with relevant work experience, while also earning revenue to make the businesses self-sustaining. Oriole Enterprises already fixes school chairs and tables and has created benches for the North Fond du Lac School District, and is working on creating a line of decorative metal items for sale to the public.

"I thought, 'Great, why not?'" Helm said. "We want our kids busy all the time. They can walk around Walleye Weekend and say, 'I built that: tech ed is cool because I get a product.'"

Collaborative Planning

The plan evolved to have Horace Mann advanced welding and fabrication students cut the fish from steel; the fish would then be transported to Mercury Marine for powder coat painting to seal the steel in

the company's traditional, trademark black finish. Once painted, the fish would be returned to the students for lettering.

Keeping his focus on teaching skills, Helm had the dozen advanced students brainstorm how to create the fish. They developed a pattern from an actual enlarged photograph of a walleye, and set about creating a prototype. After analyzing their use of steel, they decided that traditional plasma cutting methods resulted in waste. They solved that problem by making a wooden template in the school wood shop and then tracing it onto the steel, which gave them more control in using the surface area. They cut each fish individually by hand, and this resulted in less product waste.

"The guys were very artistic in their first prototype," Helm said, noting how the students burnished the steel to suggest scales before acknowledging this detail would be lost under paint.

Helm took their initial prototype to the professionals at Mercury, who advised that the fish size needed to be increased for visibility and that some additional changes were required to adapt to painting conditions.

"It needed to be about twice the size to see it from a distance," Gonzalez said. "We provided feedback on sharp edges from both the safety standpoint and for painting. It needed to hang in the paint booth, so we explained why the eyehole needed to be bigger. The lesson was that sometimes there are limitations in real life—in manufacturing or in selling in the marketplace—so we have to make changes."

Using the feedback, the students recalculated their pattern and some of their creative process. "It was overwhelming starting off, until we got a system going," said Josh Thielke, 17.

"We had a different idea every day," said Tyler Holzman, 18, about the project's early start.

Choosing to use the template instead of a machine-produced pattern meant that each fish was cut by hand, making each an original piece of art. And while hand-placing the wooden template conserved steel, it created another problem: It would start on fire from the heat of the plasma cutting tool. The solution? "We made more templates and soaked them in water," said Cade Wolf, 17, which allowed the team to rotate templates without slowing down their work.

System for Success

The system they developed ensured continuity of product, and increased speed in production. Cutting out the fish was largely done by Thielke and Tyler Goedderz, 18, after Wolf worked the initial sheet of steel and kept a hand on all stages of creation. Grinding was handled by Haden Gresser, 16, and Holzman, who focused on softening the steel edges and backs to prevent cuts while handling the signs. After the group decided on a style of mounting hardware for the signs, Gresser committed to this portion of the project, cutting and bending metal strips to specification.

A May field trip to Mercury Marine showed the students how the painting happened. Along with seeing some of the fish in process, the tour provided a larger view of local employment available after graduation from a two- or four-year college program. "We have skilled trades working here," Gonzalez

said. “Whether it is at Mercury Marine or in the greater area, there are a ton of opportunities in this region; we want them to know their opportunities post graduation.”

With input from Mercury Marine on font size and style, the students completed the signs by creating and affixing white vinyl lettering to showcase nearly 60 events at the festival. Helm had recently purchased the vinyl cutting machine, and it worked well for this project.

Helm’s students recognize the scope of their project, and how they rose to the challenge of the unexpected opportunity.

“It’s awesome that a big company like Mercury Marine chose a little school like us to do this,” Thielke said.

“It shows what hard work does and pays off; put your mind to it and get it done,” said Holzman, who added the company could have chosen to work with college students. “I definitely recommend shop for everyone—it gives you a work ethic and you can explore things.”

Their collaborator at Mercury Marine says the completed signs look fantastic.

“They really embody the essence of Walleye Weekend and the tournament,” Gonzalez said. “I am most proud of these students starting something and seeing a real-life application...the hard work of students and the community—that’s what it’s all about.”

Wolf mused that they could possibly see the solid, well-made signs at many future Walleye Weekend celebrations: “We might see them for the rest of our lives.”

That’s a fish-story worth re-telling.

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