



Jeff Kahlow owner of Big Guy Hats stands in the room with many photos of the hats made and worn by his family and many well known people. **Aileen Andrews/ The Reporter.**

hold on to your hat

LOCAL HAPPY HATTER MAKES FRIENDS AND PHOTO-OPS WITH CREATIONS

MONICA M. WALK
Special to The Reporter

A hat tip seems the most appropriate acknowledgement for one of Jeff Kahlow's hand-crafted creations. But, applause, mouth-agape pointing, and requests for photos are the more common responses—because even when it's on a head, a Big Guy Hat is far from an ordinary topper.

Jeff has re-envisioned the concept of "hat" to include renditions of near-life-sized deer heads chomping wedges of cheese, clearly recognizable caricatures of sports stars and celebrities, and scale-models of

Lambeau Field. He has developed more than 2,000 patterns in categories that include outdoor sports, competitive sports teams, celebrities, events, and other miscellaneous brainstorm.

Despite their impressive and eye-catching size, the hats are nearly weightless and easy to wear: Jeff carves each design from a block of polyurethane foam and airbrushes the often intricate details. He has been honing his artistry for 18 years.

"I've carved close to 17,000 hats by hand," Jeff said. "I make 900 to a thousand a year with the time I have. I'm backed out about three months, and working on orders for February now. Ten years ago, I'd be done with an order in two-to-three weeks, now it takes two-to-three months. I actually turn down more orders than I take

Name: Jeff Kahlow

Age: 51

Years in Community: Mayville until age 10, Fond du Lac since 1970.

Occupation: Owner and Artist, Big Guy Hats.

Location: W6475 Rogersville Road, Fond du Lac. www.biggyhats.com

Hours of Operation: Phone (920) 923-0004 for an appointment.

Reaction to nomination to Success issue: "I was thrilled. I'm honored to be nominated as being successful. I thought it was very nice to get the call."

To what do you owe your measure of success? "MY WIFE! MY FAMILY! MY FRIENDS!"



Above, Jeff's wife Sandy at left, his daughter, Jeff, and son pose in Jeff's G-Force hats. At right, Jeff chats with Troy Aikman in the tundra hat, and at bottom, Larry the Cable Guy sports his Gil R. Done Dallas Cowboys hat. **Submitted Photos**

in—that's part of creating by hand and not mass production."

HOBBY TO BUSINESS

His hobby turned business thanks to the 1995 request of a Fond du Lac resident, who had seen some oversized cowboy hats Jeff made for fun and asked if he could create a mallard hat to be worn for a speech at a Ducks Unlimited meeting. He later told Jeff he could have sold the hat many times over at the event. That was a lightbulb moment.

"If they were going nuts over a duck, what would it be like to do a sturgeon?" he mused. "I did four and took them to Wendy's and sold them before the door closed. I knew I had something going."

In fact, as the hat hobby increased in scope, his employers at Interior Systems Inc. (ISI), where Jeff has done upholstery work for 31 years, encouraged him to reduce his hours and pursue his hobby as a business. He branded his hat business from a nick-name that developed through his work at ISI. Between his two lines of employment, Jeff estimates he works approximately 70 hours weekly. But, he says he can't wait to get into his workshop every day.

"I really don't get sick of it," he said. "Every hat turns out different and I look forward to seeing the finished product."



CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >>>