

So you're going to retire (you *think*)

"If you can find me, and if I like you, I'll make you a sign."

By Mary Soyenova

Retire? That's what you do to a car!" says Bill Reidel, of Little Ferry Signs. Bill is a master sign painter and wood carver, well into his eighties and he is decidedly not retired.

When my husband, Ed, passed away, I wanted to close the door of my shop and call it a day. With him gone, so it seemed, so was the fun that we all know is the thread running through our craft. Ed was the light in my life and my right-hand guy. I was determined to sell all my equipment and be done with sign painting—which has been the most creative part of my life for over 35 years.

"Wait a year," suggested Dana Fox, long-time friend and sign painter who has Fox Signs over in Wartburg, Tennessee. "You can sell your equipment then if you still want to."

Turned out that was really wise advice. As Dolly Parton's song goes, "You can't make old friends." Dolly is spot on.

So I retired, handing my customers over to the younger upstart graphic designers in our town of Black Mountain, North Carolina. This area, a small mountain town near Asheville, has been a sign painter's dream. Tourists are Black Mountain's life-blood and when I landed here 25 years ago the town sign painter had died the year before.

In a small town, many of the shops and businesses are started by people with a dream. It was my passion to help Black Mountain put on the best "face" for their businesses. I became an integral part of the community and one of the threads in a growing, flowing, mountain tapestry.

Life unfolded right on into retirement. And then came all the things I'd looked forward to doing, that I could never find the time to really commit to until I was retired: yoga, gardening, hiking, competitive swimming, mushroom hunting. It was like being on an endless vacation.

But vacationing wasn't enough Our craft is being of service to our community. Vacationing

isn't the same as serving. Just cruising along wasn't enough. Sure, girls like to have fun, but the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth.

So people would ask me to make "just one more" sign. And one more became a few more and then a few more after that. Slowly I went back into my shop but not back into business. "If you can find me, and if I like you, I'll make you a sign." That's my retirement song and I'm still singing it.

Now I am doing the work I really love, mostly sandblasted and hand-carved house signs. And I'm taking my time—no more banners, no more magnetics or the ubiquitous swimming pool rules sign. I found some fellows who would blast for me, so no more struggling with heavy bags of sand. I raised my prices—ha! Why didn't I do that years ago?

Don't give it away One piece of wisdom: Don't give it away. I've found that you'll have lots of "friends" who need a cheap or free sign, "since you're retired." Doesn't every shop have stacks and boxes of odd sized off-cuts that we saved because we might find a use for them? It's a short trip from finding a use to being used.

Sigh... I've learned a thing or two for sure about people, pricing and how retirement means whatever you want it to mean. The point is that you define it. Yes, I do "volunteer" sign work, because there really are some worthwhile groups and non-profits here. I want to give back to the community that supported me for so many years. Some things you do for love, some things you do for money

But I do this sparingly, with consideration for the sign shops out there who have overhead and employees. Plus, these folks help me out when today's designs won't translate to my ancient equipment!

My point? I have such a passion for sign painting and at my age I bring to the work all of who I am. A part of who I am is my 74 years. So the "work" has to be that perfect blend of serving and payment, art and philanthropy.



This was a donation to a local charity that feeds street people and the homeless. Blue Ridge Sign Supply (www.blueridgesignsupply.com) donated the panel. Remember the old song "Walk right in, set right down"?

Let's talk legacy More wisdom: Try to find a young person to mentor. When we go, all the experience and knowledge we have stored up goes with us. Hand lettering is experiencing a revival right now, and I've found a young sign painter who is earnestly and seriously making his way. I'm going to give him (ulp!) all my *SignCraft* magazines, and a wonderful Langnickel fitch because I'm fairly certain that I won't be painting any more brick walls!

So, retire? Don't sit around doing nothing, because you'll rust! When people ask if I've really retired, I tell them, "When they pry my Exacto knife from my cold, dead fingers, that's when I'll really retire!" **SC**



Mary Soyenova's shop, Black Mountain Signs, is in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Photo by Herb Way.



I made this welcome sign well over a decade ago, and it was broken and abused. It was a mess! I had backed the SignFoam HDU panel [www.signfoam.com] up with overlaid plywood and it was failing. I replaced that with aluminum composite material, carefully repaired the damage to the sign face, then repainted it. Now, hopefully it will outlast me!



A local artist did the design for this "Save the Monarchs" mural then she and I painted it on the wall of the local museum.



I sandblasted and painted this SignFoam HDU panel for Kudzu Branding of Black Mountain.