

# Mike and Jay Szczoczarz

Seekonk, Massachusetts

When you open a sign business, you may imagine or wonder if your son or daughter might someday work with you and eventually take over the company. Family-operated sign businesses are fairly common and it's a good thing to see your business pass along to the next generation.



Jay, Mike and Chris

That's how it's working out for Mike and Jay Szczoczarz, better known as Mike Z and Jayzee. ("Everyone in our family goes by Z," explains Mike, "thanks to all those Zs in our last name.") The father-and-son team has worked together for over 27 years.

Their shop is in Seekonk, Massachusetts, which is right on the border with Rhode Island, and has two 30-by-50-ft. bays. One is divided into a small showroom, a computer room with the printers and plotters, and the CNC router room. They do most of their 3D sign production there, too. The other bay is for trucks and graphics. There is an office upstairs.

SignCraft talked shop with them on a typically busy afternoon. Mike, now 71, is trying to slow down a little after a career as both a firefighter and a sign maker. Jay, at 46, is moving towards assuming the bulk of the responsibilities of running the business, along with November, his wife.

#### Shop name:

Countryside Signs

Shop size: 3000 sq. ft.

Staff: 4 total

Age: Mike, 71; Jay, 46

#### Graphics equipment:

Roland VP-540 printer/cutter

Multicam 3000 CNC router

Gerber Edge

Gerber cutters

#### Online:

[www.countrysidesigns.com](http://www.countrysidesigns.com)

and on Facebook



Hand-carved HDU ribbon panel with gilded incised lettering on 40-by-72-in. panel of 2-in. HDU board with a beveled edge. It's single faced, finished with Matthews Satin acrylic polyurethane paint [[www.matthewspaint.com](http://www.matthewspaint.com)], and 23K gold leaf. Outlines and secondary copy were hand lettered with 1 Shot enamel [[www.1shot.com](http://www.1shot.com)]. "This sign is a good example," says Mike, "of how the shape of the sign was dictated by the layout of the copy. I didn't start by picking a cool shape and try to make the copy fit—I did the layout then the shape."

## How did you get started in the sign business?

**Mike:** I started like a lot of sign people—with *Mad Magazine* drawings, Ed “Big Daddy” Roth and hotrods back in the fifties. That got me into racing, and then into pinstriping and lettering. I had always done drawings, so it was sort of natural. I did some fine art stuff, and invariably someone asks you if you can paint a sign for them. You discover a commercial outlet for your art.

After high school, I worked some factory jobs but I did signs on the side. I had to bring a truck from the factory to the sign painter, and sign painting instantly caught me. I told the woman who worked there part-time, and she told me the union offered night classes. I took the class for a year and ended up working part-time at the same sign shop.

Later, that position ended and I started doing some signs on my own as M&D Art Service—for Mike and Deb. Looking back, they weren’t very good signs. [Laughing.]

Then I became a fireman and did that for 22 years with the Pawtucket Rhode Island fire department. After a few years with the department, we built a home on five acres outside of town. We renamed the shop as Countryside Signs. Signs were my secondary career, and most of my work was truck lettering.

When Jay was in high school, he became even more interested in art and design and lettering. After high school, he went to sign school. About that time we decided to open a shop.

**Jay:** Dad thought it would be better for me to get some formal training if I planned to make this my career for the rest of my life. So I went to Butera School of Art in Boston, which had a two-year sign program. At the end of my first year, Dad was ready to open a shop and asked me if I wanted to do that or continue for the second year at Butera, which covered computer-cut vinyl signs.

I was ready to get to work, and I didn’t have a big interest in the computer. I was into hand lettering. Dad was working with the fire department and I went to work full time for him at the shop. That was around 1990.

**Mike:** It was good—he taught me some of what he learned, and we both improved. We worked really well together.

## Was it a retail location?

**Mike:** Up to then, we each had our own customers and we worked out of our home. I had always gone just by Mike Z, thanks to the spelling of my last name. So Jay went by Jayzee Designs, and he had his own following. We rented a small building that had been a gas

station. It worked out well as our first shop. When the rent went up I decided to build a garage at my house for our shop. We worked out of that for several years.

Our mainstay was, and it still is, truck lettering, but we do a little bit of everything—



PVC board letters on an aluminum composite panel that was inlaid into the 37-by-53-in. HDU panel. Mike often does this to get a smooth background and to add strength to the sign panel. It's finished with Matthews Satin acrylic polyurethane paint. *Wine & Spirits* panel is v-carved HDU board with a smalt background. The brick panel at the top is from Texture Plus [www.textureplus.com].



PVC letters on 61-by-96-in. SignFoam HDU panel [www.signfoam.com] finished with Matthews Satin acrylic polyurethane paint and clearcoated metallic gold, with black glass smalt background.



CNC-routed 2-by-16-ft. panel of 2-in. HDU board with 22K gold leaf film on the letters and a smalt background. The font on the primary copy is Esoteric from LetterheadFonts.com.



RealGold 22K gold leaf film [www.realgoldinc.com] and high performance vinyl film; *Hanna's* is Mike's own font.



22K gold leaf Florentine Realgold film letters over high performance vinyl film on 21-in.-by-16-ft. black aluminum composite panel with aluminum J-mold trim and OVC corners. The department logo and station number are digital prints.



Hand-painted 67-by-84-in. sign on 3/4-in. overlaid plywood sign with mahogany trim, finished with matte acrylic latex paint. The center art and lettering was hand painted with enamels. The Welcome panel uses 1/4-in. aluminum composite letters on a 1-in. PVC panel, finished with Matthews acrylic polyurethane paint. The lobster is a VectorArt 3D clip art image [www.vectorart3d.com], CNC-carved from HDU board, with details added by hand.



Acrylic faces on custom aluminum cabinets, with LED lighting; 6-by-20-ft. overall. "This was fabricated and installed by Neolite Signs, which was my son Michael's former company," says Mike. "Jay designed the logo and did the paint work."

even a few electrical signs. We have plenty of work, and we don't really do any advertising. We have a website, but it really needs updated with examples of our latest work.

**Jay:** Back then, we were still hand lettering and hand carving everything. In 1994, Dad retired from the fire department and we bought our first computers.

### That must have been quite a change from doing everything by hand.

**Mike:** Yes, and the computer was good for us because it helped increase our volume. It wasn't long before we outgrew our home-based shop, and around 2001 we moved to a nearby industrial park.

We were also doing more and more 3D signage, most of which was sandblasted. After a while, we decided to add a router because we knew the market was there for 3D signs. At the time, it seemed a lot of other shops were adding printers, and it looked like the CNC router would open more doors for us. It did.

Sandblasting is labor intensive, dirty and sweaty. The router can achieve the same look and more. It's a great tool.

**Jay:** Along with our own work, we do a lot of wholesale milling for other shops on the router. There's a lot you can do with a router.

### When did you add the printer?

**Mike:** A few years ago our 36-in. plotter was wearing out. We decided to replace it with a print-and-cut machine, since it could do the large cutting as well. I like having the printer—it lets you do the special effects you used to do with an airbrush without spending as much time doing it. There's more time upfront creating the design, but once it's done, it's just a matter of printing and installing.

**Jay:** We do a lot of what you would consider traditional truck lettering, and we cut a lot of vinyl lettering. Some of our customers have fleets and we do a lot of repeat work. A lot of this work is fairly conservative.

### Is it just the two of you?

**Mike:** No—Chris Robillard has worked with us for about six years. I think he is a good fit with our team. Chris handles all phases of vinyl and print production. He also runs the router, and does fabrication and assembly. He takes a lot of jobs start to finish.

You couldn't ask for a better employee. When he joined us, he really jumped in with



Jay did this design using the Conclave font from LetterheadFonts.com, then it was printed.



Two 48-by-66-in. PVC panels over an aluminum frame with Realgold 22K Florentine gold leaf film lettering. Military logos are digital prints.



Carved 3-by-4-ft. HDU panel with 1-in. tubular aluminum frame. It's finished with Matthews satin acrylic polyurethane paint, and the lettering and artwork was hand painted with 1 Shot paint. The barn and wall are a rendition of the farm's actual barn and grounds.

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You'll see this article there with even more photos.



"I drew this hand-lettered script," says Mike, "then placed it over the circle that holds the secondary copy. At first that was the whole design, then Jay suggested the two green bars behind it to give it a base to rest on. It worked out well. It's a digital print."



CNC-routed 32-in.-by-16-ft. panel of 2-in. HDU sign finished with Matthews Satin and black smalts, with an airbrushed blend on the main copy. The font is Esoteric from LetterheadFonts.com.

both feet—even though he had no sign shop experience. He’s a quick learner, and the computer work comes naturally to him. He’s our computer tech. He’s so enthusiastic and fun to work with. He gets what we do, because he understands quality.

My wife, Deb, has always run our office, and is a key part of the business. She does all the book work and is our Gal Friday. We’ve been married 50 years and work really well together.

We don’t plan to get much bigger, though. Bigger means you have to take on more volume, and that usually means more headaches. We’re more profitable when we do what we do best. We might add one more person, but that’s about it. I’m slowing down, or at least trying to, and we’re making plans for Jay to gradually take over the business.

**And Jay will eventually take the reins.**

**Mike:** That’s the plan.

**Jay:** Am I a little nervous about eventually taking over the business? You bet. It’s a big responsibility. But I’m going to have a lot of help from November, my wife. She’s very good with financial things, bookkeeping and scheduling. That will leave me free for sales and production. Since my father does most of the design work now, I’ll have to start doing more of that as he slows down.

I’m really grateful that things worked out the way they have. Dad and I have always worked together well and it’s great that the business has done well. One of the reasons, without a doubt, is that my father and I have the same work ethic. We get the work out and we take care of our customers.

**Mike:** We’re like everybody else—we’re a small shop in a tough business. You’ve got to work smart, stay competitive and focus on design. Design is what sets a shop apart.

What keeps you going are the many

customers who appreciate the work you do for them, and understand the value of a well-designed, well-made sign. We strive to do a good job and to treat people right. That’s what we’ve built our business on. **SC**



This logo was designed using another of Mike’s custom fonts, then printed.



Hand lettering and computer-cut 22K gold leaf Engine Turn film