

Dairy & Livestock

Zietlow's farm signs are works of art

Key Points

- Lori Zietlow turned her talents into a business in 2005.
- She makes custom farm signs and livestock awards.
- Zietlow also designs and prints custom T-shirts and sweatshirts.

By HARLEY BUCHHOLZ

THERE'S a sign of things to come at Lori Zietlow's home in Rosendale. It says, simply, "Zietlow's Custom Signs and Livestock Awards," and it represents her livelihood.

It's starting to make her a comfortable living, she says of the artistic signs she creates for a largely farm, FFA, 4-H and agri-business customer base.

Zietlow recently completed an 4-by-8-foot sign to hang in a WE Energies wind power lobby in northeastern Fond du Lac County. The scene looks west over Lake Winnebago. "I did put cows grazing under" the windmills, she notes.

Much of her work consists of hand-painted championship awards for livestock shows. They're a departure from the traditional trophies, ribbons and banners given to show champions. She paints her creations on wood or old sheet metal.

Graphic designer

An artist since her early school days and an experienced graphic designer, Zietlow turned her talents into a business in 2005.

"I was in the printing business for 25 years," she says. "I'd much rather bust my butt for me" — even when it means days that start at 7:30 a.m. and often extend past 11 p.m. when she's working against a deadline.

Her art is hanging all over the country, although, strangely, not so much in Wisconsin. She hopes to change that this summer by displaying at farmers markets in Rosendale and Green Lake. She's found more fertile ground in states as widespread as Pennsylvania, California, Florida, North Dakota and Texas. Recently, she completed a series of four 4-by-8-foot panels showing the range of 4-H and FFA projects for a county fair association in New York.

Business comes to her through a website: www.zietlowcustomsigns.com. She also displays at the Indiana State Fair. (Her work space there is free, she explains, while the Wisconsin State Fair charges vendors \$2,000 for its 11-day run.)

She uses acrylic paints and applies five to six coats of sealer for outdoor signs. She paints freehand, usually working from photographs sent by customers.

The longtime artist became a business-woman "a little accidentally." She explains that her sister, who has a feed store and gift shop in Indiana, encouraged her to do a couple of generic farm animal pictures to sell at the store, "and it grew from there. Then people asked if they sent a photo, could I do a picture. Then they asked if I could do awards for stock shows."

"I enjoy it. It's fun. I enjoy working from my home," Zietlow says. "I started with sheep, pigs and cows, then [was asked to do] others; then it just turned into everything. ... I just did one for the world's rarest chickens for a guy in Florida who



ART ENTREPRENEUR: Lori Zietlow shows off a wall of her custom-painted signs and livestock awards in her studio.

raises the antique breeds."

She's also done complicated outdoor signs for feed mills and implement dealerships, complete with new tractors or vintage ones. (She says the newer tractors are easier to paint than the older models.)

In 2008, Zietlow was chosen by *Country Living* magazine as a featured woman entrepreneur. But the following January and February, she acknowledges, "I scraped to pay the bills." So she drew on her graphic design skills to add another branch to her enterprise: screen-printing on apparel, mainly T-shirts and sweatshirts. She bought a screen printer and started to do farm logos. Now she does general livestock shirts and others to order.

"I'm having fun with my little screen-print thingy," Zietlow says, laughing.

She also does freelance graphic design. She's a member of Something Special From Wisconsin and proudly displays its familiar emblem along with a wall full of her signs in a small studio attached to her home.

And even though some of her days are long, "if there's something I want to do, I go do it." That includes a twice-a-year pool tournament with a 75-year-old partner. She's also attended livestock shows in Denver and Louisville, along with her annual trips to the Indiana State Fair.

While Zietlow likes being on her own and drawing enough income to make a living, she says one of her greatest pleasures is receiving the handwritten thank-you notes that come from 4-H and FFA members who have earned one of her hand-painted works of art.

Buchholz writes from Fond du Lac.

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