

Few sign artists in recent times have had as much influence on sign layout as sign artist/author Mike Stevens

Michael R. Stevens

1942 - 1989

Mike Stevens died suddenly on April 20, 1989. Mike was the author of *Mastering Layout: The Art of Eye Appeal* and *Ninety-Nine Showcards: A Photo Album*, and produced two audio tapes and a video

tape. He recently contributed a series of articles on layout to SignCraft.

Since his death, SignCraft has heard from scores of sign artists — some long-time friends and others who knew Mike only through his

books, tapes, and articles. All mentioned his impact on their work, their business, and in many cases, their lives. The limits of space make it impossible to share all of their comments. We felt these words and photos from the sign artists and friends who knew and worked with Mike during his years in San Jose, California, were a fitting tribute to this outstanding sign artist. — Editors

Harrison Todd

San Jose, California

Many have heard the song *Blue Monday*, but April 24 was my worst Monday ever. My wife and I had been away for the weekend, and before I even reached my shop, local sign artist Ann Meske called with tragic news. Michael Robert Stevens had died of a heart attack the previous Thursday. He was 46 years young.

When Mike and I met 20 years ago, we formed an instant alliance. His creativity, dexterity, speed, and grace were the combination of special talent, enthusiasm, and lots of practice. I was fortunate to meet Mike at that time, for his practice would also involve lessons. At that time, Mike wasn't interested in glass gilding, wood carving, or screen printing. He always wanted to concentrate on layout and brush lettering, and he worked on projects that he had the most ability to control.

At the time, Mike had a sign/showcard studio on the second floor of the largest PayLess Drug Store in San Jose. This store contained the most spectacular collection of display sign work I had ever seen. Most small cards were "knocked-out" in Mike's casual or script styles, but they all had great rhythm and design format. These signs changed frequently, and he often produced several hundred cards in a day. There were always new banners hanging in the store. Every time I visited, it was a learning experience. Each department area had its own impressive displays, and the department managers always wanted Mike to make their area the most effective. When he finished an area, people were overwhelmed. Even oil paintings of people or products were often incorporated into these exhibits.

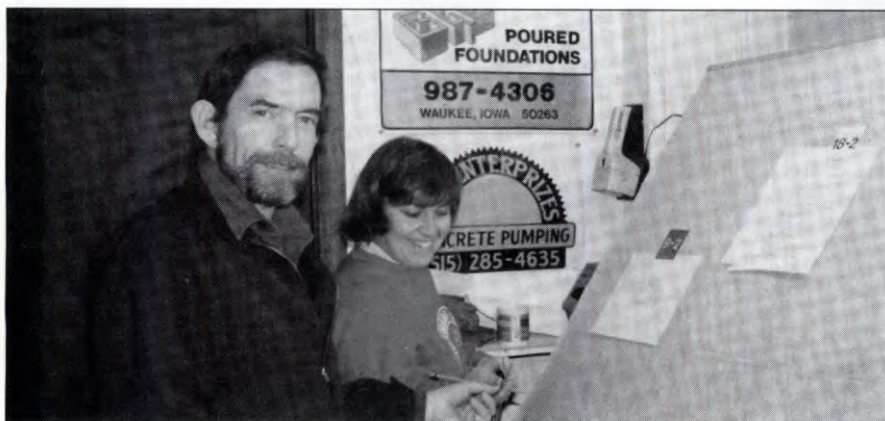
Mike was his own boss, and if he tried out something that he didn't like, he would learn from it and rework the project. The store was a great



Mike's shop, circa 1966



An early photo of Mike at work



Mike and a student at a workshop a few years ago

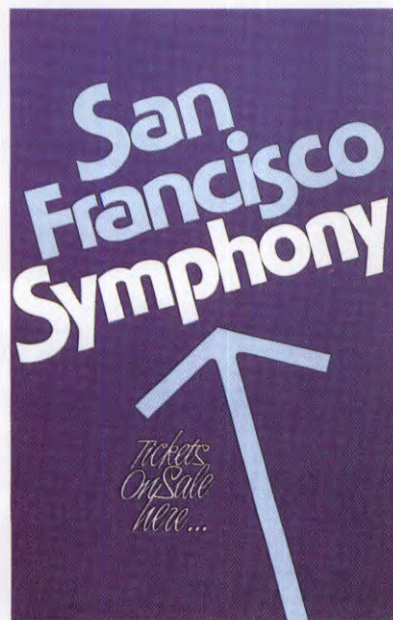
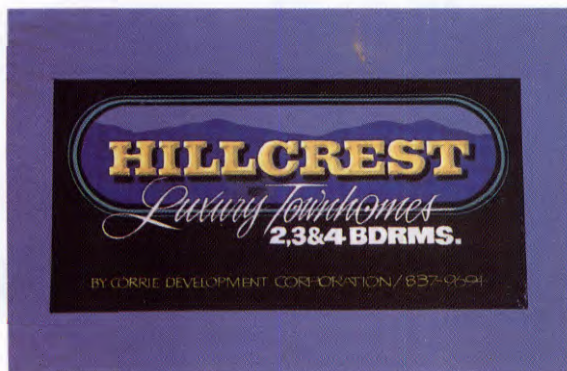
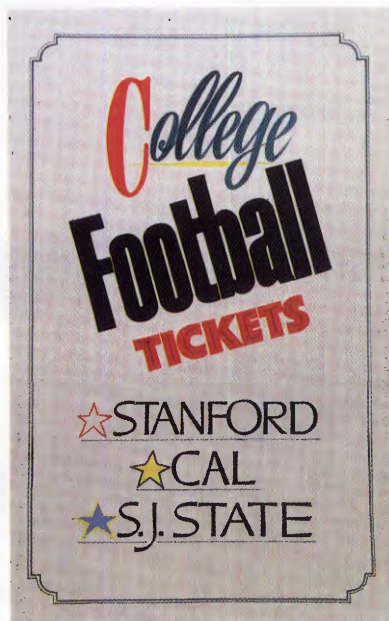
place for experimenting, and as friends we would critique his projects as well as mine, and he would talk about the book he intended to write. This was 20 years ago, and I knew he would accomplish that goal. I have never seen anyone so committed to learning. His ideas about spatial relationships were so powerful that he not only made black and white paper banners colorful, he made them true works of art.

Mike worked at brush control so that every stroke would be executed correctly the first time. He knew that a good sign artist must complete a project in a reasonable amount of time for the job to be economically profitable. His approach was to spend more time in the beginning on his ideas (doing a thumb-nail sketch), then use his speed to execute the project on time. Since he learned from every job, if he wanted to spend more time than was normally allowed, he considered it an investment in his future. This is how he developed his personal ideological framework. Working as hard as he did, it is no wonder that Mike accomplished so much in his short career.

He had a very positive attitude about capitalism, and though money was important to him, the development and analysis of ideas was his main, long-term goal. It was the basis for his integrity. Mike loved to read and study good books. In 1971, Mike insisted that I read *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand. I started my own business the week after I finished reading that book.

Mike was always very proud of his daughter, Dawn Marie, who, at age 22, is an assistant editor for a magazine in New York City. It should be noted that he dedicated his major book *Mastering Layout* — *Mike Stevens on the Art of Eye Appeal* to Dawn, and now she is a writer.

Many of us in San Jose knew Mike personally, so I reserved a private room at his favorite Mexican restaurant, El Burro, for all of us to get



Work from Mike's San Jose years

together. On Wednesday, April 26, (the same day as his funeral, in Lexington, Kentucky), twenty-eight friends gathered for a wake in his honor. Many of his friends shared stories and experiences of their times with Mike, and I am sure that he would have been proud.

The local sign artists attending were Terry and Susun Wells, Ted Maddock, Johnny Britto, Ed Rose, Joe Curtis, Rob Gaines, Terry Hubbs, Ann Meske, Paul Rice, Darin Price, Dave Wilde, Ed Patronski, Art Gardner, Dave Meredith, Ralph Morocco, Greg Lake, Rich Lokke, Micheal Muscato, and Terrie Ward. Bill Paris drove for 2 1/2 hours from Santa Rosa, and Lane Walker came from Reno, Nevada, a 4 1/2 hour drive each way. Betty and Kay Trout, Product Sign Supply, also attended.

It is recognized by all that Mike's willingness to expand and benefit our profession will certainly be remembered by future artists forever. From his perspective, intellectual honesty and a long-term point of view is most important, and that which is right remains.

Joe Curtis

Campbell, California

I'm honored to have known Mike Stevens. I'd like to share something he told me when I first met him: "Once you can talk intelligently to your clients, they'll never argue with you." After taking one of Mike's early workshops, then studying his journals and book, this short statement changed my life dramatically.

And that was only the beginning. Mike not only mastered lettering and layout, and started a renaissance on the West Coast, he also started a new career within his existing one by writing, teaching, and encouraging an infinite number of people. His ideas and concepts rapidly spread across the country.

The number of wonderful and talented friends I have met through Mike keeps growing. The profound truths he left for us have produced an incredible array of talent that will change the sign industry forever.

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Mike's ability to analyze and interpret were tremendous. If he had been an astrophysicist, we would probably be visiting neighboring galaxies this year. Mike taught us that through an acquired talent (a lot of hard work), and by applying his vocabulary (in his book), you can execute your work with excellence.

His untimely death is a great loss to us all, and I know that every time I pick up a brush, I will think of him. Thank you, Mike, and may your light always shine.

Gregory Lake

San Jose, California

I first met Mike Stevens in March of 1972, as I was just getting started in the sign trade at a PayLess drugstore here in San Jose. I had never even held a lettering brush, let alone know what to do with it once I had picked it up. Mike was leaving PayLess to go into business on his own. He came walking into the shop, this quiet, soft-spoken individual, and asked me who I was. I explained my situation to him. Needless to say, the intimidation factor was overwhelming because I was literally engulfed in Mike's work throughout the store: show-cards, photo displays, and the like. Yet, Mike set all my fears and uneasiness to rest with the simple statement, "Well, kid, so you'd like to learn the sign trade."

This began a friendship that lasted 17 years — one that I don't think will ever be replaced. Besides the tremendous talent that Mike possessed as a sign painter, he also was the warmest, most giving, most "human" being that I have ever had the good fortune to meet. His interests went far beyond the sign trade into philosophical pursuits, the arts, teaching, and finally, his excitement about writing. The fact that Mike has left us is only true in the physical sense; his ideas and concepts about signs and life in general are still very much alive. I consider myself very fortunate to have known Mike, and I'll miss him beyond measure.

Ann Meske

Los Gatos, California

I had the good fortune of working

with Mike Stevens at Harrison Todd's Sign Classics in the early 1980s, during which time we became close friends. I had heard the "legend" of Mike Stevens long before I actually knew the man — and I was simultaneously intimidated and anxious to be working alongside him. I worried (needlessly) that Mike might be a snob, or worse yet, a sexist snob. I couldn't have been more wrong; Mike was an extremely modest, sensitive man, and we had an almost instant rapport. Not only did he respect my talent, but he always had a special knack for making me feel bet-

ter about myself during a period of self-doubt or worry.

I was, however, intimidated by Mike's incredible lettering speed. His mahlstick would make rapid tap-tapping sounds as it raced across the sign face while he effortlessly painted perfectly formed letters — it was truly amazing!

The gifts Mike Stevens gave to the sign industry — his teachings on design and layout — are obvious. His influence is enormous. But to me and to his other friends, he also gave the gift of true friendship — always a great listener, and someone who would make you want to do more, to be more, to follow your dreams.

Mike and I were in touch right until his death. We called each other on our birthdays, which were one week apart, and at other times when we just wanted to share thoughts, or complain, or laugh about something. His death is a very personal loss to



One of Mike's favorite forms of sign shop promotion was a flyer like this one, which he used about 15 years ago in San Jose. Joe Curtis had this copy. Over the years Mike had designed such flyers for several other shops, including the one at right for Carole Evanson's shop.

"The flyer was his main form of promotion," says Joe. "I've heard that some evenings he would slide the flyer under the door of businesses he felt were prospective clients. When I first got in the sign business, I was amazed at how much business Mike had — and no Yellow Pages ad. One of the reasons, along with his outstanding work, was this great little flyer."



me, as well as to the entire sign industry. He enriched my life, as friend and mentor, and I shall miss him always.

Micheal Muscato

San Jose, California

I enrolled in Mike's class about one year into my lettering career. He gave me an organized approach to the art of sign painting. Elements of design are applied to lettering, the same way as in fine art.

Besides being an excellent instructor, he motivated my work efforts. Ultimately, Mike Stevens instilled in me and my career a sense of purpose and dignity.

Greg Martin

San Jose, California

Without the influence of Mike Stevens, I fear we sign painters might be a bunch of competitive, protective "artists" — victimizing ourselves and our clients. Mike opened our minds to communication, and analysis of the mechanics of layout. This can only be a healthy development.

SignCraft has shown us that Mike's ideas have inspired sign people across the country and beyond. Mike's teachings have enabled the sign artist's creative needs to meet the customer's needs, satisfying both in the process. I feel that the breadth and depth of Mike's research, signs, and teachings have made the sign business more than a convenient way to make a "fast buck". He showed me that a sign career is an exciting and foundational education in graphic design, that reaches into all artistic endeavors. The vocabulary brought forward in his lessons is educational beyond the art training I received in schools and private lessons.

From experience, I can say we've all attained higher levels of intellectual achievement, creative facility, sales ability, and communication skills. We now know what we're talking about when educating a new sign customer or advising higher caliber clientele on very specific ideas. Thank you, Mike. Like everyone, I feel I am the luckiest of all for having known you. May we all see the light that shines from your devoted heart.

Lane Walker

Sparks, Nevada

"The difference between night and day" would best describe my career before and after I saw Mike's work in that Spring 1982 issue of *SignCraft*.

Although at the time I didn't understand why those layouts were blazing off the page, I knew that's what I wanted my signs to do. Over the next seven years, Mike taught me, in an effective and unselfish manner, the principles necessary in accomplishing that goal.

Mike established a standard of skill and achievement that, while inspiring and influencing me, remains a distant goal. He taught me to be satisfied with nothing less than the best effort, and he introduced me to sign painting as a craft and an art. I'll miss him greatly.

Terry and Susun Wells

Santa Cruz, California

In the past 25 years, I can honestly say a day has rarely gone by without my thinking of Mike. His influence was so great in my life that I approached my sign work — as well as parts of my personal life — always considering what his point of view would be.

We were the same age, had daughters the same age, were in the business the same number of years, and had a lot of the same frustrations. He was always determined to achieve perfection in his field. He had the enthusiasm and intellect, and untiring drive to excel. It wasn't easy for him — he was very hard on himself. And very, very self-critical.

We spent a lot of time together, constantly discussing the sign business. He recognized that guidelines on sign layout, design, color, etc., had not been written down for a beginner, as well as a veteran, to learn from. His journal, books, and tapes provided the needed information and gave all of us fresh excitement for our trade.

Susun and I loved Mike, and are glad to have known him as we did. It makes us happy to know that he sampled the success he did in recent years, and that he had such a positive influence on so many people.

John Cox

*Thorough-Graphic Signs
Lexington, Kentucky*

It is most gratifying to share a closeness with someone as eager and generous as Mike Stevens. His goal was to elevate the sign artist to his rightful role in the graphic arts field, and the last six years had been devoted to this end. Through his teachings, he propelled many people to be their best.

Mike Stevens has already had a tremendous impact on my career and I'm sure this inspiration will continue far into the future. To have been a part of his dreams and aspirations is truly an honor and a privilege that cannot be expressed in mere words. His direct and indirect influences will never be equaled nor will they ever be forgotten.

Mike gave me a book by Robert Henri, a turn-of-the-century artist and teacher, titled *The Art Spirit*. Henri writes, "Through art, mysterious bonds of understanding and knowledge are established among men. They are bonds of a great Brotherhood. Those who are of the Brotherhood know each other, and time and space cannot separate them...the members do not die...and that part of him that is of the Brotherhood does not die."

I have lost a mentor, a business partner, an inspirator, and a friend. But I believe we have only lost what is physical. Mike Stevens' spiritual influence will be ever present in the lives of many who have "taken a path of heart".

John and Mike had recently opened The Center for American Sign Artists, with the purpose of providing training for beginners as well as continuing education for sign artists.