

# Profile:

## Dave Correll & Ann Meillier Faribault, Minnesota

It's Monday afternoon, and Dave Correll is in the middle of knocking out four showcards for a new product presentation. "They're taking me forever," Dave says, laughing a bit. "The client came in on Saturday and said he needed them by Tuesday morning. They've got plenty of copy,

too. You know how it is — this is one of those jobs that you find every reason to postpone."

Dave and his wife, Ann Meillier, are beginning their second year at Brushwork, the shop they opened in southern Minnesota. Dave is originally from Moorhead, Minnesota, and Ann

is from Faribault (pronounced FAIR-bow). A town of 16,000 people, Faribault is located about 40 miles south of Minneapolis-St. Paul. "We looked at a lot of towns before we decided on moving here and opening our business," Dave says. "It's far enough removed so that it's not part of the city, but we do get a fair amount of business from there."

Dave became interested in the sign business while he was going to college. A friend, Kathy Hocevar, lent him a copy of *SignCraft*, which prompted him to enroll in the sign lettering and design course at Detroit Lakes Area Vocational-Technical Institute in 1983. There, Dave met instructor Rod Felt, who he credits with sparking his enthusiasm for the trade. He met Ann — who was in the same class at Detroit Lakes — in 1983.

Ann was going to college when she decided that she wanted to be involved in an art-related career. She didn't think she wanted to go into commercial art, though, so she started doing a little research. When she saw sign painting mentioned in a catalog of technical school programs, Ann decided to give it a try.

"I didn't know a thing about it," Ann says, "but I liked the idea. The more I got into it, the more interesting it became."

Ann soon began working as a sign artist in a Milwaukee-area shop. Meanwhile, Dave had gone to work for Terry Kid in West Allis, a suburb of Milwaukee. "I worked with Terry for three years and learned the ins-and-outs of the business there."



### Getting started

Before opening the doors at Brushwork, Dave and Ann spent about nine months planning and preparing. The first thing they did was contact the Small Business Administration office in Faribault. Next, they took a few Small Business Administration classes and decided that the first order of business was to draw up a business plan. Dave believes that it was the strength of the plan that enabled them to get a business loan from the bank. "A detailed plan is very important," he says, "and I'd recommend anyone who is getting started take the time to sit down and





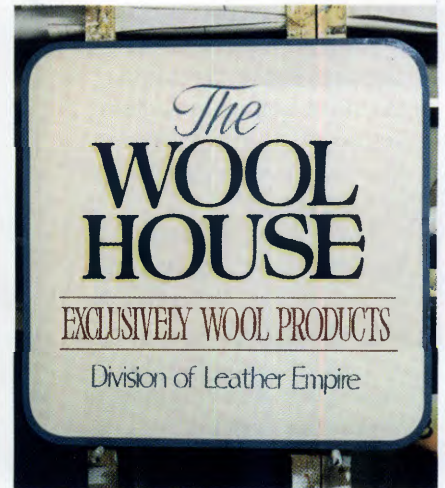
draw one up. It's not just a tool to get a loan from the bank — it helps you get an idea of what will be involved, including the start-up, operation, and management of your business." Dave and Ann's plan is so detailed, in fact, that it even includes job descriptions for each of them.

Ann deals with most of the customers and handles most of the "business side" of running the shop — the bookkeeping, advertising, inventory, etc. She also does design and lettering, and helps out with fabrication on larger projects. Dave does about 75% of the shop's production.

"Most of my work is direct customer relations," Ann says. "I usually try to find out what the customer's needs are, and try to get a mood or feeling from them. I might mention a possible solution or two. Later, Dave and I talk about it and see which of us could best handle the job. If we both have ideas, then we might present a couple of different options. Usually from that point on, one of us will take over that particular job. We don't work together on a design that often, outside of trying out our ideas on one another."

While Dave was working at Terry's shop in Milwaukee, he was primarily involved with layout, design, and lettering. As a result, sign fabrication was something new for him when he and Ann opened Brushwork. "Sign construction — maybe because it wasn't a big part of my job at Terry's

— is probably my favorite part of the business now," Dave says. "I'm not saying that I don't enjoy lettering anymore, because I do. But putting a



sign together from scratch — from design to fabrication to installation — is just a blast for me."

### The shop and the market

Brushwork is run out of a 1500-square-foot shop. It includes 1350 square feet of work space, and a 14-by-18-foot customer showroom/office. They're happy with their location and the way the shop is set up. It works well for the types of signs they make.

A large part of Dave and Ann's business is made up of wood signs and vehicle lettering. "What we do is basically a cross-section of commercial sign work," Dave says. "Banners, showcards, trucks, magnetic signs, snowmobiles, storefronts, windows — we try to be as versatile as we can. We've done some unusual and uncommon work, too — such as hot air balloon banners, smart signs,

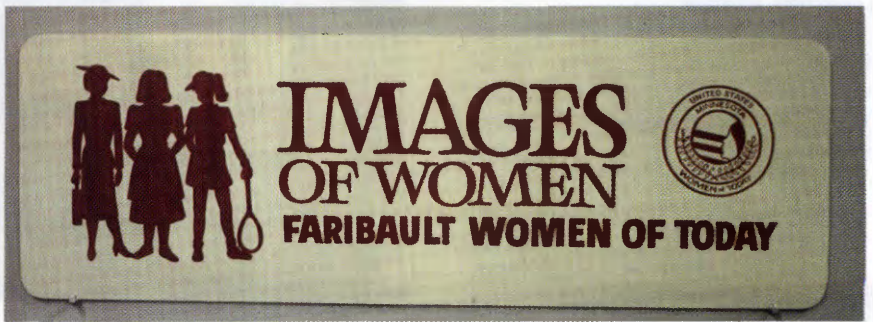
and indoor 3D foam signs."

Dave and Ann are also looking forward to doing courtesy benches (see *SignCraft*, Sep/Oct 1988). Faribault just passed an ordinance which allows the benches, and the program will be up and running by this summer.

Dave has found that in a small town like Faribault, business contacts are a real advertising commodity. "Really, it was our early customers who spread the word for us when we first opened," Dave recalls. "The one thing about moving to a small town and starting a business there is that you really have to prove yourself at first; a lot of people are cautious toward a new business. The positive side is that once you've earned their respect, you'll never lose it."

"In June of '88 — the first month we were open — we did great. But then, last summer's drought began

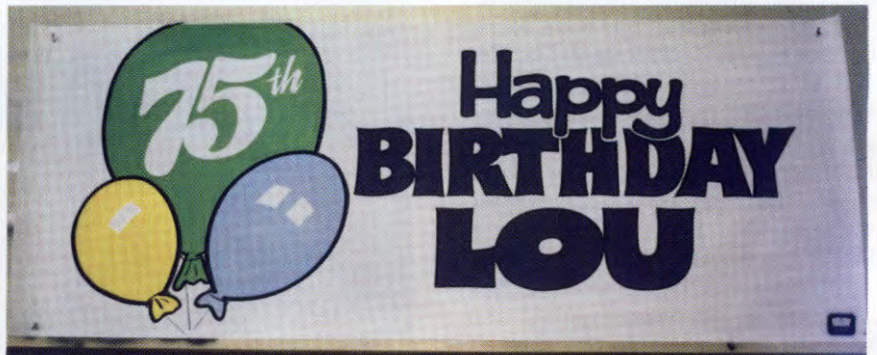




to take its toll — everyone was hurting, and things got pretty tight. By September, though, business started picking up, and this spring has been great for us.”

One aspect of the business that they feel has figured into the shop’s start-up is a clean, professional image. Right from the start, Ann and Dave have worked at making sure their attitude toward the customer’s work was reflected in the shop.

“I just can’t say enough about having



All the signs featured on this page were designed by Ann.



a professional appearance, inside and out," says Ann. "It's been a big help to us. We wanted people to see something different from what they expected to see in a sign shop. We wanted them to have a different image of our shop, and it's proven to be one of our selling points.

"The professional image does help gain the customer's confidence — that is, if the customer cares about their own image. The people who weren't sure of their needs often tell us after the fact that they let us do their work because they liked the neat, organized look of the shop. Many times, customers who aren't sure about what they need will look around and talk a little about their sign, then say, 'Do what you think is best...' which are every sign painter's favorite words.

"Of course, people who care only about price could care less about how your shop looks, or if it reflects the type of work you could do for them. But it is important to the customers you want to get and keep — the ones who care about the quality of their signs."

### Looking ahead

Dave, 27, and Ann, 28, are still fine-tuning their operation. "If we were starting over," says Dave, "we'd be more aggressive in our pricing, and more specific in our advertising. We have used a lot of different types of advertising — everything from direct mail to newspaper to business publications to radio — you name it. Some worked well and some didn't. We had our best success with the direct mail and ads in the daily paper.

"I'm hoping that things keep working out for us — I'll admit that I'm kind of confused sometimes, especially with everyone in the business going so hi-tech. We hope to stick to the more creative, artistic approach. In fact, that was part of the original business plan. We wanted to be a quality commercial sign shop, specializing in non-illuminated signs. We enjoy having our own business, and we want to build it on the craft of hand lettering, with an emphasis on creative design."

