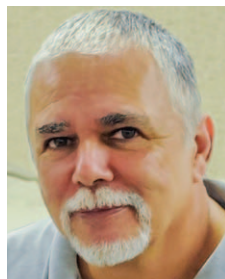


# Sandy Baird

Port Colborne, Ontario, Canada

I came into signs through the back door. I have a background as a lecturer of Native Studies, which is something I've done for over 40 years—including full-time teaching stints at Georgian College and Sir Sandford Fleming College. I'm a Native American, a Wolf Clan



Cayuga, one of the six Iroquois nations.

I was always involved in car racing, so in 1980, I decided to take a few years off from teaching to build and race Formula Vee cars at tracks like Mosport and Watkins Glen.

When I started racing I was just like everyone else who raced—always running around, cap in hand, trying to get someone to letter my race car for free. I had always been involved in art and design in one way or another, though, and I have a diploma in Technical Illustration. I was used to taking blueprints and making them into isometric drawings. In that sense, I kind of viewed the world as 3D drawings. That experience helped a lot when I started lettering, because my eye was already used to looking for dimension.

It wasn't long before I started making other kinds of signs, and I was naturally drawn to dimensional sign work. Vinyl always kind of left me flat, because it was so limited in what it could do. The CNC router changed that for me; all of a sudden I had 3D as an option.

When I first got into it, not many people had CNC machines. So it was up to me to teach myself, which was good and bad. It gave me an edge, because I was getting to use this brand-new technology, and I thought I was getting

**Shop name:**

Windwalker Sign Studio

**Shop size:** 1,000 sq. ft.

**Age:** 61

**Graphics equipment:**

24-in. Roland Camm-1 plotter

AXYZ 4008 CNC router

Corel Draw

Vectric Aspire software

**Online:**

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

Windwalker Sign Studio on

Facebook



4-by-8-ft. Precision Board HDU board [[www.precisionboard.com](http://www.precisionboard.com)] with PVC letters





4-by-8-ft., all Extrite Treated Exterior Panel material [www.extrite.com]



4-by-6-ft. oval and two 3-by-10-ft. signs, all Extrite



4-by-8-ft., all Extrite





4-by-8-ft., all Extira



3-by-8-ft., all Extira, finished with Rustoleum Metallic Accents paint



15-by-28-in. interior sign done with medium density fiberboard

pretty good at it. But as more people got into CNC work, and I started seeing all the awesome stuff in *SignCraft*, I thought I had lost everything that made my work unique. I remember thinking that since there was so much good CNC work out there that *SignCraft* would never be interested in what I was doing.

What really makes an artist's work unique, though, is how much of themselves they invest in it. When I was learning to do silversmithing on the reservation, my teacher told me that whenever you make something with your hands, a part of your spirit is retained in it. So it taught me to always try and leave the very best of who I am in every sign that I do.

My traditional native teachings help me look at the world in a slightly different way than

many of the people around me. Somewhere I have a picture of me in full buckskins—it's made of six deerskins and there's something like 150,000 beads on it. I did all the silversmithing on it. A lot went into that. I learned all those arts from different people, and that's all part of my past, part of who I am. I've learned something from everyone I've met in my life.

Native people have always been visual. We never had a written language to communicate. We communicated through paintings and stories. To me, sign making is a way of telling a story. It's a way of telling how a business owner feels, and how they see the world.

That's what keeps the design end of this business so intriguing for me. When someone walks in and says, "I'm in business and this is who we are and what we do," it's almost like a little movie starts playing in my head of me walking up to the front of your business. I tell customers that their sign is their first chance to make a good first impression—you're setting the stage for how people will view you and your business before they even get inside door.

*SignCraft* has been my lifeline since 1990—when it arrives in the mail, the shop closes down, and the rest of the day is spent pouring over the articles in the magazine. A good sign friend, Sue Banasky from Source Signs in Nanaimo, British Columbia, also helps keep me stay motivated and on the straight and narrow. When you work in a one-person shop, it is important to have the support of other small sign shops to keep you fresh, to bounce ideas off and pick you up when things get tough.

There's another sign maker and designer



48-in. in diameter Extrira panel with PVC letters



20-by-47-in. sign with Sintra PVC letters on black and gold vinyl film





2-by-3-ft Extira panel with PVC letters



4-by-4-ft. overall, Extira panel over steel frame, with steel spectacles

not far from me who talks about using that same storyteller approach to his signs—Shane Durnford, who used to live right over the hill in Creemore. Shane’s a great guy and I really appreciate his work. From where I used to live in Terra Nova, Shane was in the next little hamlet over the hill. I remember the first time I visited Creemore—I just stopped in to the grocery store—and I looked around and thought, “Wow, look at the signs in this town!” His design work is beautiful, and his colors—his colors are just phenomenal.

Some of the best sign work I’ve done has actually come to me in dreams. I know that sounds strange but native people believe that the dream world is just as real as the conscious world. I’ve had dreams about designing and creating signs that were so real that the next morning I walked out and started looking around the shop for the finished sign.

Nearly every sign I’ve done has sold another sign for me. I’m in a town of about 16,000 people. We’re right on Lake Erie, about 20 minutes west of Buffalo on the Niagara peninsula. In a half hour’s drive there’s probably one million people, not including



30-by-22-in. Extira panel



Extira panel; dog image is a digital print



4-by-7-ft. Extira panel



The sub is 4-by-13-ft. coated foam on overlaid plywood and the sign is a 2-by-10-ft. Extira panel.



"Prior to moving here," says Sandy, "I spent a few years converting a church over to a home and shop. My friend Pierre Tardif did this sign for me."

when you cross over into the States into Buffalo. So even though I'm in a relatively small town, there are bigger towns and tourist areas not far away. I do some work outside of town but the most is close to home.

This winter I plan to start promoting myself outside of the local area. In a small town, it doesn't take long before you've done all the bigger signs, so I'd like to let people in other areas know that I'm here and what I'm doing.

I do most of my signs using Extira panels. It works great for me. It stands up in the weather, and I tell my customers that most of my signs will outlast me. I use Benjamin Moore water-based paint, the same as you use for houses, so I know it's going to hold up. When you do a nice-looking sign that is built to last and installed properly, it gets the business two doors down thinking, "Wow, I'd like to have a sign like that, too."

Until now, I've done most of my designs in CorelDraw, then sent the vector files to the bridge software that talks to the XYZ CNC machine. This winter I am learning to

use Vectric's Aspire software ([www.vectric.com](http://www.vectric.com)). I like its ability to add texture to my CNC carvings. It's incredible how much detail it can add. Because of it, I see a lot more texture coming in my work, a lot less large, smooth, flat areas. I'm careful not to go too far overboard, though, to where every part of the sign becomes too busy, but it's really nice to be able to add textural features where I want to. It's most important that the message comes through first, and the little features that make the sign nice are secondary to that.

I wish I'd gotten into this business when I was 25. I just love it so much. I've been making signs since 1980, and it's just the most natural thing for me to do. I can be in here carving at 3 A.M., just me in here with the music on, and it's great. This is just an enjoyable way to live your life. Much of my life has been about creating artwork in one way or another. To me, every sign is art. It's art with the goal of communicating an idea. **SB**

—from an interview with John McIltrout