

Behind Bars, Signs of Pride

In a recent issue of Sign

Builder Illustrated, we ran a feature about a working sign shop housed within a maximum security prison in Utah [“Sign Shop Lockdown,” April 2007]. The by-lined author of that piece was yours truly, and in fact, I did pen that article. But truth be told, all the information was culled from telephone interviews with people who had been inside the shop—people like Dave Miller, director of sales and marketing at Nova Polymers (www.novapolymers.com), and Perri D. Flory, the shop’s long-time supervisor; all the photos were e-mailed to me from the same folks. It was a second-hand report; there was no dateline declaring the writer’s physical presence at the location being covered. This is not meant to disparage, in any way, the efforts of my original sources, as they provided substantial and invaluable insight into the workings of this unusual shop—but this was something I had to see for myself.

DATELINE: UTAH DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, SALT LAKE CITY—Following the exhaustive background check, beyond the armed guard at the entrance gate, past the waves of barbed wire, and through the hallway containing two of the heaviest-sounding door locks I’ve ever heard, I was finally in the yard. And 100 feet further stood the factory-like building that holds the Utah Correctional Industries’ (UCI) working sign shop. I was inside.

PHOTOS BY DAVE MILLER.





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This is an article about a truly impressive sign shop, run and staffed by some truly impressive and inspiring people. These guys design and manufacture high-quality signage of all types, but the one thing that resonates from this shop (that a secondhand description could have never fully impressed upon me) is pride: Pride in their individual craftsmanship, pride in their attained skills, pride in their teamwork, pride in their finished products, and pride in their shop as a sanctuary, as a purpose, and as a possible future. Only when I walked through those heavily guarded walls myself and only after spending a full day talking with these sign makers did that sentiment truly hit me.

Some may wonder how I can extol the virtues of men who, having committed various offenses of the law, find themselves locked away—many for long durations, some for life. For the purposes of this article, these men are sign makers first, and it's their work in that field that is of primary interest. Of course, it's the unusual nature of their working circumstances that differentiates them from most any other sign shop.

Many of their crimes, admittedly, were not victimless, and their actions (and the repercussions stemming from them) are not to be trivialized nor ignored. But in this prison sign shop, there are aspirations; there is hope for redemption, the possibility of grace.



Here there are men who have made mistakes, who channel their remorse into signs of pride.

The UCI sign shop is a fully functional and profitable business, and it is by no means one-dimensional. Each and every aspect of the sign operation—purchasing of equipment and materials for inventory, sales, design, manufacturing, shipping, etc.—is handled by a shop employee, a.k.a. prisoner. The shop is not State-funded and, therefore, sees no taxpayer money. The employees are paid (and handsomely, by prison job standards, at around \$7.50 per hour) and all purchasing is done using shop profits. Their “fair wage” (higher than the federal minimum wage of \$5.85 an hour) is what allows the shop to legally compete with private-sector sign shops on the outside.

“If we paid them an extremely low wage and were still allowed to bid on private contracts, we could simply undercut every other shop out there, because our labor costs would be nothing,” explains Perri D. Florry. “Keeping the wage at that level balances the playing field, and we’re competing for jobs based on the quality of our work. And these guys are confident in that.”

For anyone considering \$7.50 an hour a reason to look for work in a prison sign shop, two things to think about: One, you’d be in prison; and two, Utah Correctional withholds 59 percent of each paycheck to cover the shop’s facil-

ities and supervision.

The shop itself, separated from the housing units that hold the rest of the prison’s population, is a sanctuary for most, if not all, of its employees during the seven hours a day they spend here. “This is our place to think,” says Rick, a prison shop sign maker. “Back where we live, it’s chaos—fights, hollering, etc. This is where we can breathe.”

The shop produces most every type of sign imaginable—from dimensional, ADA, and street signs, to road construction signs, car decals, and wayfinding. One recent contract had the shop design all of the signage for the Division I athletic teams at Weber State University in nearby Ogden, Utah.

It is a well equipped facility, with stacks of 3M and CYRO acrylic sheets in shelves along one wall, a Universal Laser System engraver in the polymer section, and a graphics department running various printers, including a Roland SolJetTM Pro II V and a Roland VersaCamm SP-300. There is a room-sized oven for curing, and an outdoor courtyard for climate testing signs. With no Internet access for inmates, the shop’s components and supplies are researched via trade publications like *Sign Builder*.

“We rely on what we read to learn about techniques and new equipment,” said shop sales representative Chris. “Our next big purchase is going to be a CNC router, which will greatly improve



our productivity and allow us to do so more creative projects.

“This shop is where you can truly gain a skill that you can eventually take out onto the street. Learning to work one of these presses, or one of these cutters—that’s something not a lot of people know how to do.”

The redeeming and rehabilitative nature of the shop, say the inmates, lies partially in the trust that is placed upon them—a notion long missing in their lives. To even be considered for employment in the sign shop, an inmate must have shown exemplary behavior in general population for a certain amount of time, thereby raising his privilege level. (An inmate just entering the prison is granted a “trust level” branding of “A,” or the least amount of trust. Through good behavior, that lettered level is gradually raised. Inmates are only considered for employment in the UCI sign shop after reaching a trust level of “J.”)

Once accepted into the shop, there is a near zero tolerance for any kind of behavioral issues, both in the shop and in the living areas. The slightest infraction,

according to Perri D. Flory, often leads to an employee’s dismissal. “They have to show each other respect,” she says. “And I that gets strained, it’s my job to alleviate that pressure.”

Furthermore, shop employees are trusted everyday with hundreds of tools

Some people approach their job as if it’s a prison sentence. For the UCI shop employees, their job helps them forget their prison sentence.

and equipment that, on the shop floor and back in the living quarters, could be used as deadly weapons. Even the smallest aluminum shard that falls to the floor after a sign is shaped could be made into a prison “shank,” or knife.

“The amount of trust they place on us is uplifting,” says Chris. “It motivates people to do their best.”

And doing their best is, well, what they do best. The shop has a reputation for turning around contracts quickly.

Recently, the Utah Transit Authority commissioned 14,000 double-sided signs for its light rail system, and requested it be completed in no more than five weeks. The UCI sign shop shipped them in three. “We rise to the level,” exuded RJ, a nine-year shop veteran.

Amongst other projects, RJ works on making polymer ADA signage. On this day he is being tutored by Dave Miller of Nova Polymers, who visits the shop on occasion to show the employees some best practices for using his company’s materials, which are supplied extensively to UCI. “What I really like it when we get to see our projects go from start to finish, with everyone chipping in, and then see the product in use on the outside,” says RJ. “That makes everyone feel real proud.”

There are people who go to work everyday and feel as if their jobs are like a prison sentence. For the men of the UCI sign shop, their job is the one thing that, if only for a few hours a day, helps them forget they’re in prison. b

For more information, check out www.uci.utah.gov/signs.