



Name change to SignWorks leads longtime family-owned business to growth

by Tiffany Gann

After making the decision to change its name to SignWorks from Neon Products Co., the fourth generation, family-owned business has moved full steam ahead to market its custom signage services, which can be seen throughout Omaha ranging from the letters on top of the Woodmen Tower to the restroom signs in office buildings — not to mention having restoration projects under its belt such as the highly recognizable neon cowboy sign for Wolf Brothers Western Store.

Offering design, manufacturing, installation and maintenance, SignWorks has been building signs for Omaha organizations since 1935.

Sisters Gabrielle Ryan, vice president, and Mikaela Layson, head of accounting and human relations, are leading the family legacy now that their mother Dorsey Olson, has retired as president.

Now in its 77th year, the company was first opened at 1331 Park Ave., where it stayed for 40 years before moving to its current location at 4713 F St. Husband and wife team Elizabeth and Dwight Hatcher founded then Neon Products Co.

At that time, the majority of the company's work focused on neon-lit billboards.

Their daughter, Elizabeth Aust, carried on the legacy building a client base in a male-dominated workforce, as did Olson.

Along the way Aust registered the name SignWorks in 1974, which was upheld through May 1 of this year, when the family decided to change the name officially to SignWorks.

"We had committed to making the name change, knowing that our name was pigeonholing us into a marketplace that wasn't everything we did," Ryan said.

Today, the company reaches far beyond the neon signs of yesteryear by offering custom signage in different customizable formats including channel letters, projecting signs and electronic digital display — it's even made address signs out of license plates.

SignWorks signs can be seen throughout Omaha for organizations including DiVen-

tures, Hayneedle, Rockbrook Village, Werner Park and the list goes on.

Due to the plethora of types of signage, when asked of major growth in the past year, Ryan found it difficult to pin down any one area.

"It's hard to say there's been growth in one area more than another because every day is a completely different project," she said.

She did note however, that LED lighting is becoming more of the norm, and many signs are lit with the more cost-effective, green product.

"Neon was getting kind of moved out of the marketplace, not replaced necessarily — there's just a new component we can use to light our exterior signs," Ryan said.

But on the other hand, neon still remains a common option, for instance, signage for The Dugout, located across the street from TD Ameritrade Park. The company's glass

bender still maintains a busy schedule, according to Ryan.

Current major projects for SignWorks include NorthStar Financial Services Group's new corporate headquarters, American National Bank's acquisition of Liberty National Bank in Council Bluffs and Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo's new entrance.

SignWorks has also noticed an upsurge in electronic message centers — notably in the Omaha metro. American National Bank's sign at 90th and Dodge streets, which often displays advertisements for charity events.

Layson also noted, while the recession did slow down orders, Omaha's comparably better economy continues to improve and has led to several new businesses.

"It seems like we've been lucky being in Omaha because people are still starting businesses and that's what we need," Layson said.



Mikaela Layson, head of accounting and human relations, left, and Vice President Gabrielle Ryan with signage from a major client ... The longtime sign business continues to build client base with full-service, customizable options.