



gwinnettdaily.com

Saturday, July 07, 2007

Popping up

Man finds new career in twisting balloons

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Staff Photo: Su Anderson Balloon Guy Mike, aka Mike Clay, is a full-time balloon artist from Buford.

A young man with a bowler hat and a beard stands calmly in the middle of a room, an apron packed with latex balloons strapped to his waist. Around him, 20 teenagers - day campers at Lawrenceville Community Theatre's recent summer drama camp - practice twisting balloons into bears, hearts, hats and swords. The air resounds with popping balloons, happy chatter and that dreadful twisting-plastic sound.

No matter. The kids are having a blast and so is their teacher, Balloon Guy Mike, aka Michael Clay, a full-time balloon artist from Buford.

"OK, who wants to stand up and tell a joke while you make a balloon animal?" Clay asks the group. Hands shoot up. "Remember, you have to keep twisting while you talk," he reminds, as a boy wearing an orange camp shirt struggles to do both.

It's harder than it looks. And Clay makes it look so easy. But the skills have come with practice, and a desire to make a living out of something he just flat out enjoys.

In the last six months, regular gigs at corporate trade shows, fairs, grand openings, restaurants, churches and birthday parties have allowed Clay, 31, to take this "hobby" full-time. With his wife, Julie, expecting their first child next month, he said he's confident he's made the right career choice.

"I have the best job in the world," Clay said.

But the road to becoming a professional balloon artist has had its twists and turns.

A natural entertainer, Clay began teaching himself magic tricks after watching a magician at his eighth birthday party. Growing up in a suburb of Asheville, N.C., he graduated valedictorian but also was the class clown. He started doing birthday parties as a magician after high school, even while attending Fruitland Bible Baptist Institute in Hendersonville, N.C. At that time, he was planning for a career as a full-time youth pastor.

"I didn't really like balloons, but I taught myself how to make about five animals," he said.

Then life took one of those unexpected twists. Clay's parents moved to Atlanta. Clay moved, too, changed seminaries, and began attending North Metro First Baptist Church in Lawrenceville.

Out of the blue, a lady asked Clay to do her child's birthday party with balloons, not magic. "Out of my comfort zone," Clay said.

But he took the challenge, bought every book by renowned balloon artist Ralph Dewey, and quickly learned 50 balloon creations. "After that, I liked balloons," Clay said, smiling.

Then, life took another turn. A self-taught computer whiz, Clay helped found Neterprises, a software development

company. Soon, the job required him to relocate to headquarters in Williamsport, Pa., where he headed up the software development team. Working with big companies like Verizon and Palm, as well as dozens of smaller companies, Clay and his team created specialized cell phone software, Web sites, wi-fi hot spots and network security systems. It was cutting-edge stuff for the late '90s.

Clay kept up his entertainment skills, too, performing his balloon-and-magic show at a company dinner for clients. He caught the eye of the local manager of TGI Friday's restaurant, who hired him to entertain at an outdoor event sponsored for the Little League World Series, held every year in Williamsport.

Things went well for Neterprises until the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, when the company lost one-third of its clientele, including many small businesses located in or around the World Trade Center. By March 2002, Neterprises had shut its doors.

Newly married, Clay and his wife returned to Atlanta. Again. Clay started his own Web site development company to pay bills, but eventually realized he could do better as a balloon entertainer. So, last fall, he closed up shop and devoted himself exclusively to his new career.

To learn more, he attended Twist and Shout, an annual balloon-twisting trade show in Nashville.

"Everybody shows everybody everything at this convention," Clay said. "I sat down with Royal Sorrell, who holds the Guinness Book of World Records for largest balloon sculpture. Awesome. Exact opposite of a magic convention, where you say, 'wow, how did you do that?' And they say, 'very well, thank you.' "

Ever adaptable, Clay recently proved his skills in a time crunch. Mary Sams, director of preschool ministries at North Metro First Baptist, had to quickly come up with alternative Sunday morning programming for more than 600 children, from preschool age through fifth grade.

"With just a few days' notice, Mike created an amazing program that told the biblical story of Noah's Ark with balloons - just what we wanted," Sams said. "It kept the attention of all ages in that room. Very entertaining."

As Balloon Guy Mike, Clay's goal is to go beyond the typical image of a clown making balloon swords and bunnies. "I want people to call me for an unforgettable experience, where they see balloons twisted in impossible ways," he said. "I want to be Atlanta's best balloon entertainer."

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