

Subject: Francis S. Lestingi, Ph.D.

Company: Signs of Gold Inc., Williamsville, N.Y.

Specialties: Carved and gilded signs.

Years in the business: Seven.

Sign People

BY EDDIE WIEBER

Arts and Sciences

IN THE 1960s, Francis Lestingi engaged in clandestine activities involving drugs and *borrowed* public documents. He was never caught, but he admitted this to me in a recent telephone conversation.

DON'T FREAK OUT

Lestingi was also involved in more overt operations during the 1960s, which are in the public record and for which he was held publicly accountable...

After high school he joined the Brothers of the Christian Schools, a Catholic order, and later taught a range of subjects at schools directed by the order. During those years of the Cold War, there was a concern about the level of *intelligence* in the U.S. compared to levels in the U.S.S.R. It was expressed as something like, "Johnny isn't as smart as Ivan," and was taken very seriously at the time.

To address that concern, federally-funded programs were launched to persuade students in the U.S. to find an

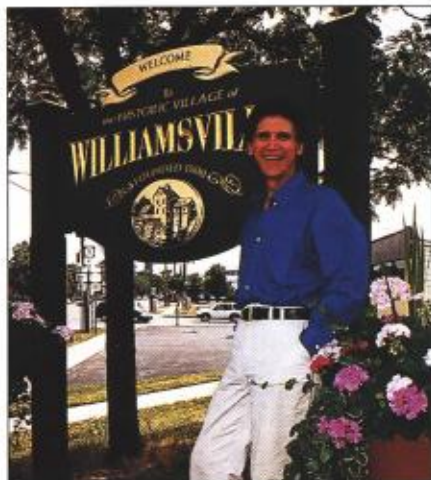
interest in the sciences. Francis S. Lestingi, Ph.D., was asked by Harvard to produce instructional graphics in one of these programs, called Harvard Project Physics.

He was also involved in the production of films, among them one that shed a very *unfavorable* light on the *benefits* of nuclear war, and another, a spoof that turned the periodic table of the elements into a comedy-in-verse.

Lestingi's activities were exposed eventually and justice was served.

That is, he received numerous awards for teaching excellence during a 38-year career at high school and college levels, including the Chancellor's award for excellence in teaching and the President's award at the State University College at Buffalo, N.Y. He also received awards for his participation in several educational films that were distributed nationally and internationally.

Somehow, one might say, his students got the message.



Lestingi, with one of four carved and gilded signs for the village of Williamsville. The ribbon above is carved in HDU with hand painted letters and shadowing, and applied with epoxy; the village's logo is hand painted below.

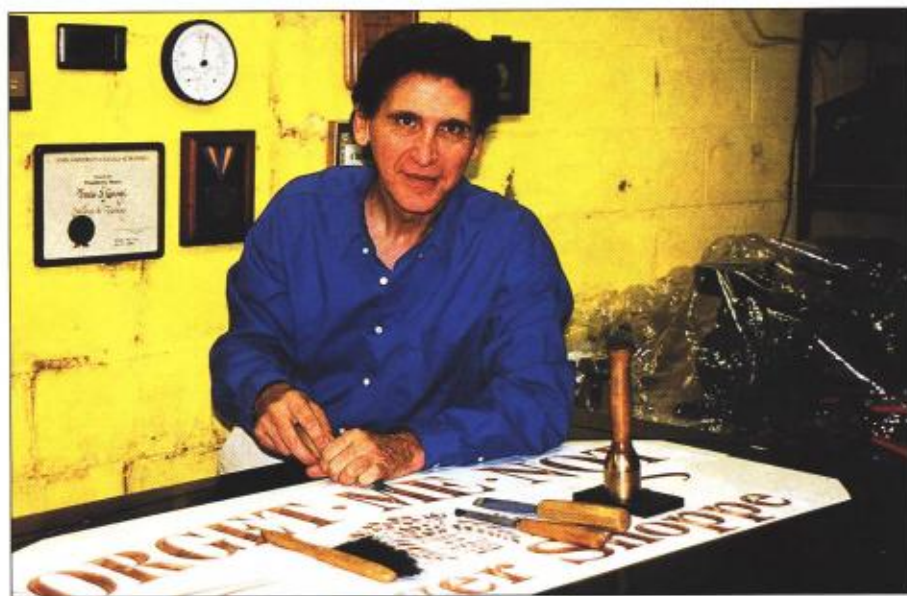
POSTER CHILD

Part of Lestingi's teaching approach was to use visual devices to communicate ideas to students. For example, for a number of years he was in charge of designing and *field testing* the graphic material for the Harvard project. These were essentially overhead projection transparencies — six volumes worth.

Throughout his teaching career he continued to rely heavily on graphic illustrations to get the point across.

So two years ago, when he decided to take early retirement from teaching to pursue a full-time career in the sign business, it wasn't as if he was entering something totally new.

He started learning about calligraphy in grade school, teaching himself from books such as the *Book of Kells*, an Irish calligraphy book that dates back to about 1000 A.D. He practiced the art on posters throughout his school years, picking up other associated disciplines along the way.



Francis S. Lestingi, Ph.D., left the classroom for the woodshop and is enjoying it tremendously.



This sign was awarded first place in a recent USSC sign carving competition. The Bible, cross and scrolls are carved HDU appliques.



The heart symbol of Ronald McDonald House is included as an applique, carved of HDU and painted red.



A classical Roman font, Esprit Bold, modified slightly, is used for the letters in "Ridgeview". The oval is a logo carved from HDU, used throughout the center.



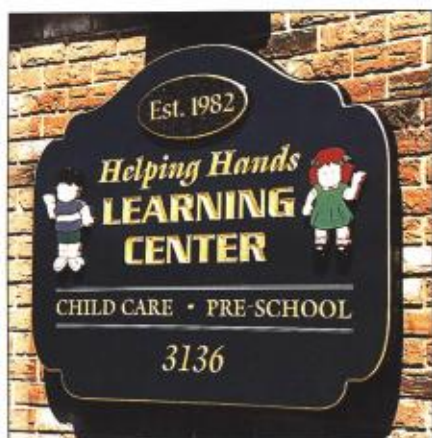
Lestingi says he used a computer program to create this modified calligraphic font.

In high school, to learn brush lettering strokes, he *borrowed* posters during the middle of the night that were taped to the window at the local drug store.

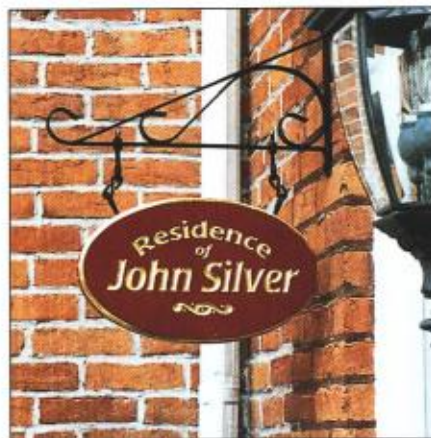
He took them home, and holding them under a fluorescent light, studied how the strokes were made. He brought them back before dawn. To this day, the owner never found out (unless he happens to be reading this, in which case, I know nothing about it — what drug store?)

Also during high school he learned how to gild from a friend's father. As a gift to his high school, he produced a copy of *The Lord's Prayer*, rendered as an *Illuminated Page* (in which the first letter on the page is highly embellished and gilded). The parchment is still on display at the school.

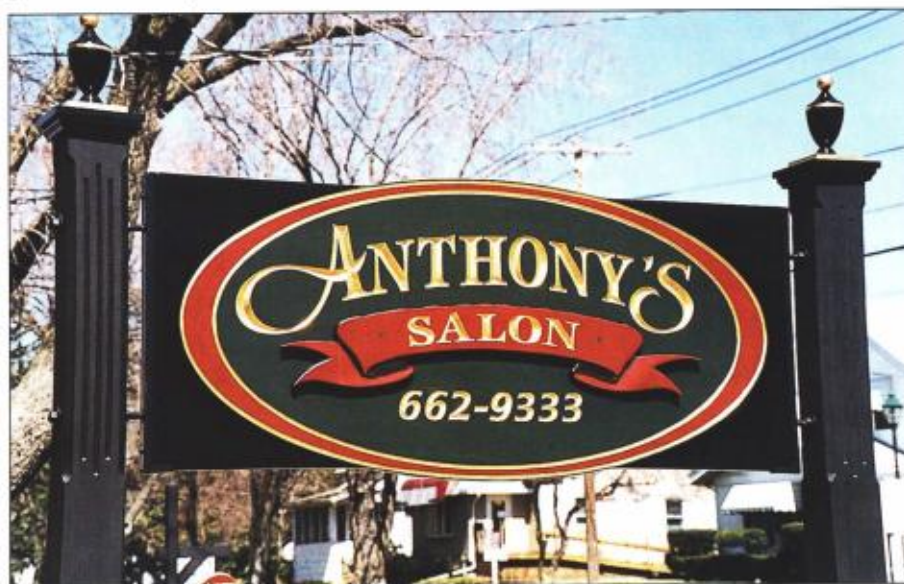
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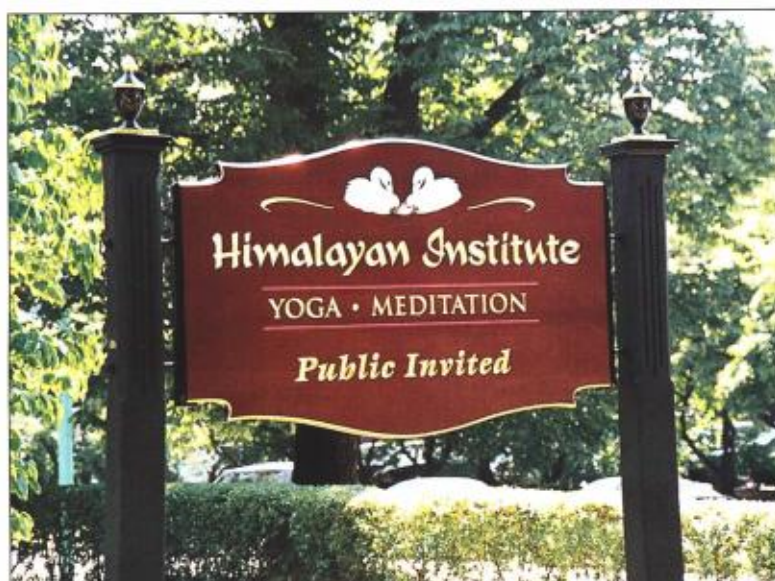
The oval date panel, and the boy and girl figures are appliqued HDU panels. The background of the date panel is smalt.



A residential sign for the owner of a seafood restaurant.



Carved mahogany with appliqued HDU ribbon.



The swans, carved in HDU, contemplate a hand painted lotus. Lestingi says the letter style for "Himalayan Institute" is an "Indian style" font he created using some of the institute's printed material for guidance.

I LOVE WOOD

Several years ago, traveling around New England, Lestingi says he saw some carved signs "and made the endeavor to see if I could find who was doing them — as though there were just one person."

Actually, he found several people and studied with them. He took a sign carving class from Jay Cooke and another from Paul White. He took Joe Cieslowski's workshop at the USSC show. He took fine art carving classes from David Galvo and Dimitrious Klitsas. About a year after taking Jay Cooke's class he began making carved signs.

They started as gifts to neighbors and friends, so they were mostly residential-type signs. Then he photographed several of them for a brochure, which he included in a letter to prospective clients. Some of these became paying customers.

He then produced another brochure featuring commercial signs and included it in a letter to more prospective clients. His clients now include physicians, churches, schools, lawyers, life care residences and businesses in and around the Williamsville (Buffalo, N.Y.) area.

For five or six years he maintained a three-day teaching schedule and carved signs part-time and weekends. For the past two years, he's been carving signs full time and he says he's very excited about it.

"I'm a *recovering* physics professor," he says, tongue-in-cheek. "I took early retirement because I was having so much fun doing this."

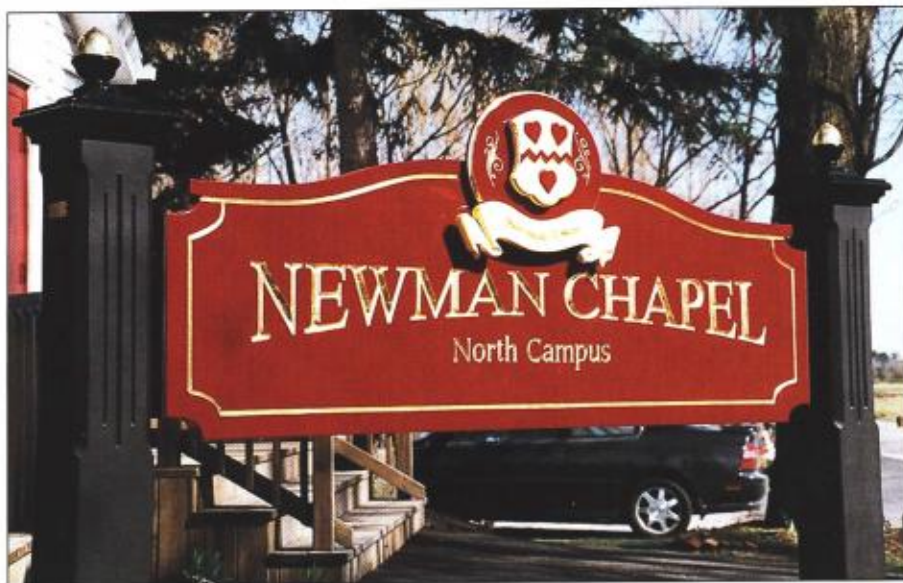
It's a *No Rush* operation. On the day I spoke to him, there were six or seven projects at various stages of completion on worktables in the 50' x 50' shop.

His product is very specialized — carved and gilded wood signs. He makes the signs himself from start to finish, but others help with installation, including his son, Stephen, a semi-pro football player/college student, who handles those 10-foot long six-by-sixes with ease.

SHOP TALK

Lestingi's work is exacting and time intensive. He says he knows there are high-tech machines that can produce in an hour what takes him all day. But he is

CONTINUED



This carved butternut sign features the crest of Cardinal Newman, the founder of the Newman Chapel.



This redwood sign, one of Lestingi's first, is for a restaurant near Chicago. The rose is relief carved and highlighted with paint.



Milano Roman is the font style this magazine uses on its cover and is repeated on the sign.

One of several signs for this academy, carved in butternut.



fascinated with the whole process. "I enjoy doing all of the steps," he says. "It's rare that somebody gets an opportunity to start literally from scratch with an idea, design it, fabricate it, install it and photograph it. I consider it a really creative, artistic endeavor."

Lestingi begins the design process on a Macintosh Quadra 800, using Adobe Illustrator™. Designs are then printed as panels on 8 1/2" x 11" tracing paper with a laser printer.

Meanwhile, the sign blanks are painted with three coats of primer and two topcoats. When the blanks are ready, a removable vinyl mask is laid on, and the printed paneling is affixed with a removable adhesive spray.

He then carves through the pattern. He does the work by hand, with a power assist occasionally from normal woodshop tools only for preparing the sign blanks.

His first choice of wood is butternut, but when it became difficult to find he switched to redwood. But redwood wasn't the best choice for the type of carving he likes to do because it has a tendency to split and won't hold details as well as other woods.

Now he's using mahogany sign blanks, which he gets from Ken Bray, a former student who operates Kenco Wood Products in Buffalo. The dense wood is wonderful to carve, he says, and holds detail nicely.

Once the sign blanks are carved, Lestingi puts the finishing gold touches on them. He doesn't hurry this part either. He uses only *slow* size, letting it dry for up to 48 hours even though the leaf can be applied after 12. "You get a much richer shine if you let it go longer," he says.

RESULTS

Lestingi says he enjoyed teaching for all those years, but is happy about being in the sign business now full time.

"One of the things about teaching is you don't know what kind of results you're getting," he says. "Maybe you're doing some good, but you don't really know. In the carving sign business, you see results. The final installation day is like a showing in a gallery."