

# John Ralph

Hamilton, Virginia

**Shop name:** Quail Run Signs

**Website:**  
[www.quailrunsigns.com](http://www.quailrunsigns.com)

**Age:** 41

**Staff:** Four

**Shop size:** 3500 sq. ft.

**Graphics equipment:**  
Epilog Mini 45 laser engraver  
Gerber Sabre router  
Gerber Edge printer  
Gerber GS15 Plus plotter

I found my way into the sign industry in 2001, after I sold a technology/manufacturing company—not for the kind of money where you get to retire, but for the kind of money where you get to take a little time to sort out your options as far as what you want to do. I have a sculpture minor, but I never really thought I'd do anything in the art field for a living.

I started doing a few projects with a friend who had been a sign maker since the '70s. We'd only worked together a few days and I'd done some really neat metal work for her, when she said, "I really feel uncomfortable about this..." I thought I was getting the boot. But then she added, "I feel like you're more of a partner." We incorporated and worked together for a

year or two where I learned the classics: hand-painting, good design, the joy of a nice lettering quill and how not to shock myself with the Electro-Pounce. When she decided to retire, I took over the business.

## Growing the business

For a short while after that it was just me working out of my garage, I quickly added a printer and a plotter, then a router. Adding the router was the game changer—we doubled our sales the year it went online. About six or seven years ago I built a shop on my property, then almost immediately outgrew it. We moved into an industrial park, then two years ago we acquired an old fire department, which is a really fun building—tall ceilings, big bay doors,



6-ft.-wide Extira structure with applied HDU panels. Raised letters are HDU acrylic, and the sign edges wrapped in aluminum with plenty of exposed bolts. "We really tried to evoke the characteristics of old railway graphics on this," John says. "We did a lot of airbrush work on it, too."

and it still has the siren on it. It has a great atmosphere—people always ask if there’s a pole, but there isn’t.

It’s well-divided for our workflow. We have offices and clean production rooms, and the big fire truck bay is the dusty production area. The smaller two-car bay is the clean area where we paint. We’re artists who hand carve and hand paint, but we’re also like a body shop—we’ve got a paint booth, and we mask and spray all day long.

A few years ago we switched over to the Matthews paint system [www.matthewspaint.com], and that stuff is amazing. We can prime, paint and finish a sign in a few days. The days of spraying oil-based paint and waiting forever for it to cure are over. There’s a bit of a learning curve, but it pays off. We’ve also enjoyed tinkering with it, like adding Mica powder to the clear coat to create some shimmer. 1-Shot still plays a prominent role in our hand painting work.

Although HDU is a staple for custom signs, we use a lot of Extira Treated Exterior Panels [www.extira.com], which are a terrific substrate for signs. I’m surprised how many sign people don’t know about it. It’s strong and easy to work with. Properly primed, we can get a glass-smooth finish on Extira with Matthews paint.

A couple of years ago we bought a used Epilog laser [www.epiloglaser.com], and the number of crazy applications we’ve found for it in sign making is mind-boggling. We’re not an award and trophy company, but you can do a lot of sign work with a laser. It has saved us so much time that we can’t imagine not having it.

We recently added all new welding equipment. Until now we’ve been outsourcing most of our welding, but we decided that we’d just rather have the control in-house. The one thing that I would love to fit in, but we just don’t have room for, is a powder-coating oven. We sub out all of our powder coating, and sandblasting, too. We have a relationship with a sandblaster who picks up panels then brings them back to us the next day. No one here misses the days of donning a suit and mask and making a terrific mess.

### Where the work comes from

One of the things we’ve enjoyed, in addition to word-of-mouth advertising, is a steady stream of referrals from the little



6-ft.-tall, 30-in.-thick, two-sided wheel with slotted and cross-drilled brake-rotor to prevent view-through. All HDU with steel mounting assembly to tie into existing post, and a lot of airbrush work to add detail.



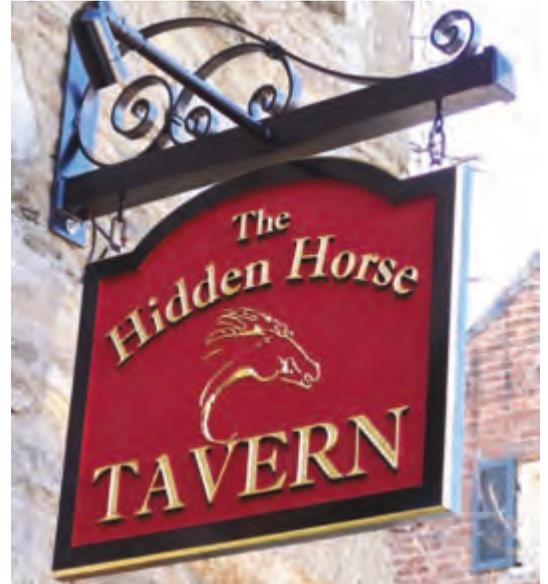
3-ft.-wide HDU sign with carved HDU soap bubbles. Integral aluminum structure has a custom bracket with down lights. Three LED fixtures are integrated into bottom to light walkway and entrance. Photo by Dragon Ridge Photography



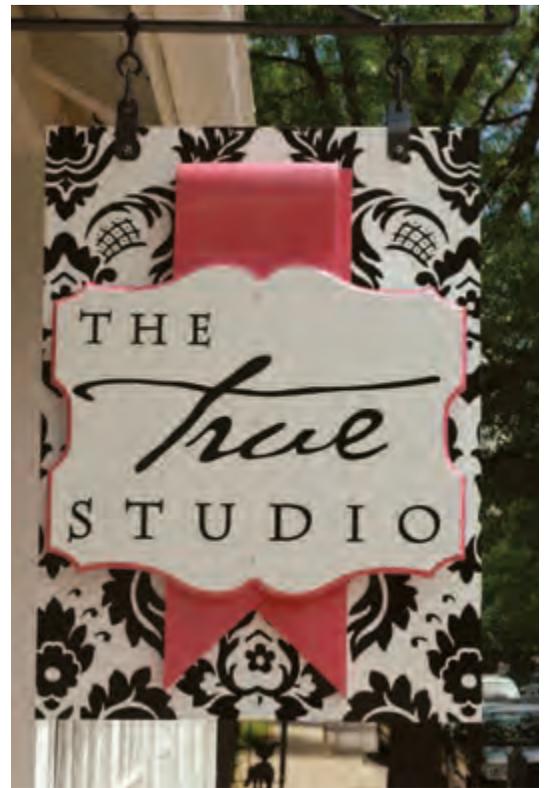
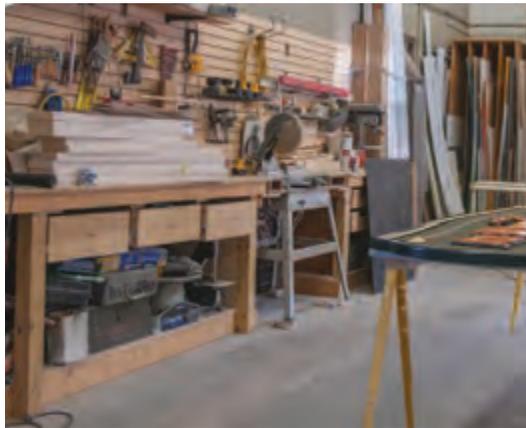
4-ft.-wide aluminum composite panel with faux antique finish; router-cut HDU letters were hammered with a ballpeen hammer before finishing with Matthews Paints [www.matthewspaint.com].



From the left: Phil Ralph, John Ralph, Jennifer Daniel, Chris McMinn



2-ft.-wide HDU sign with 23K gold leaf graphics on red smalt background; illuminated with LED lighting



4-ft-tall Extira backer panel with an Extira sign panel mounted on hand-carved HDU ribbon graphic

Items staged on racks as they go in and out of the paint booth  
Photo by Dragon Ridge Photography



3-ft.-diameter carved HDU sign with carved, airbrushed fleurs-de-lis  
Photo by Dragon Ridge Photography

historic towns in our area. Often the town's architectural review board gives out our name. They've worked with us, they like our signs, and they know our projects get through architectural review with no issue.

As the shop has grown, we've focused on a few different things—adding people, getting more organized, being more efficient and developing the business-to-business aspect. We like working for other sign shops, and there are quite a few sign and print shops in the region that use us for their carving and router work. These are terrific projects because it's always fun to create from someone else's concept. All we need is the design and we're off, without a lot of complicated interaction with the customer.

A few relationships like that can keep a shop pretty busy. Right now we're working on jobs for a franchise sign shop, a couple independent sign shops and a promotional printing company.

What I like best about marketing this way is that it drastically expands our geographic area with minimal effort. In other words, I can market to ten sign shops in neighboring Fairfax County much easier than the million plus people that live and work there.

Finally, relationships with commercial developers have been a cornerstone of our growth. We do amazing numbers of entry features for residential and commercial builders.

### The staff and the workflow

There are four of us here at Quail Run. Chris McMinn has been here for five years. He has a fine art degree and is a really amazing asset. Like me, he can carve, gild and paint. We often



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30-in.-wide painted Extira with hand painted wheel



24-in.-wide carved HDU panel with 23k gold leaf on smalt background, with a hand painted pictorial



3-ft wide overall with HDU sign panel



30-in.-wide HDU sign with gold leaf and hand painting.”



3-ft. carved HDU sign. The raised acrylic horse was cut on the Epilog laser cutter, and the panel was aggressively distressed with wire wheels and brushes.

call the paint shop “Chris’s Room” because that’s where the magic happens. We couldn’t have grown to where we are without his talent, dedication and perfectionism.

Phil Ralph has been with us for three years. He quarterbacks our installations and keeps the shop running smoothly and the shop truck fully stocked—when he’s not keeping everything in tune, he sands tirelessly and without complaint.

This January, we added Jen Daniel. That’s a risky time of year to add another person, but we were going to start annoying people by falling behind—we definitely needed help. An experienced graphic artist with a penchant for organization, Jen stepped in and pretty soon we had a website, brochures, a Facebook page and a level of organization that keeps everything moving the way it should. She has



4-ft.-wide multi-layer HDU sign. "This was a rush order," says John, "it was made and installed in five days!"

really taken a lot of the administrative and design pressure off of me.

Though we all tend to have our specific duties, we collaborate regularly on the best, neatest and most efficient ways to make signs.

Now Jen and I usually team up on designs and pricing. She interacts with the customer and gets the approvals; then I make the sign—the parts and pieces, the routing and carving. Then it goes out to the shop floor, and Chris and Phil take it from there.

We've finally reached a level of staffing and structure where we can give all jobs, from the mundane to the monumental, equal attention. We view this as a critical framework for our continued growth and success. **SC**



36-in.-wide PVC web substructure with carved and gilded HDU faces applied to it; pictorials are hand painted.



Carved Extria backer panel with raised/applied HDU logo panel. Posts are double steel c-channel with exposed stainless steel hardware for fun.



New channel letters were faux-finished with rust and rivets; storefront was wrapped with reclaimed barn wood and aged copper trim and lights.

