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Paul Hickman is the owner and founder of Urban Ashes, a unique furniture and frame manufacturer that employs Michigan's transitional and disabled labor force to create frames and moulding from recycled and salvaged wood. Photo by Jan Ziegelman Cohen.

The Beauty Of Natural Imperfections Saving Trees And Saving Lives

BY AJ TRAGER

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ANN ARBOR - Picture frames add ornate boundaries for memories, faces and moments frozen in time. While the images and faces of the photos can be replaced, the frame provides stability to the stories that are captured within its borders.

In a 3,000 foot shop in Ann Arbor, Paul Hickman and his small team of employees cut, sand and finish salvaged wood into custom picture frames, furniture and coasters that "families will be fighting over for decades."

Hickman received a degree in architecture and fell in love with how to transform planks of wood into elaborate, creative structures. The Indiana-born designer spent many years living on the west coast learning how to manipulate blight stricken, salvaged wood and brought his expertise to Michigan in the late 1990s.

In 2008 Hickman decided to build a frame company employing transitional and disabled labor, working exclusively with urban salvaged wood from Southeastern Michigan. Less than a year later on April 4, 2009, Urban Ashes officially launched.

Each frame is unique, much like every individual that works alongside Hickman. "Urban Ashes ... maximizing America's under-utilized resources and human potential," reads the company's website. Each piece that is created in the shop is hand-selected for character and is enhanced with petroleum-free finishes. The glass, paper insert, backing and frame materials are all sourced in Michigan.

"One thing I didn't know about was the labor force. I had run shops and worked with people, but I didn't know a thing about that and I wondered, 'How hard could this be?' I found out there is a lot of unique elements to that, much more than just being in the framing industry," Hickman said. He then contacted Mary King, who was the director of the Washtenaw County Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative, and put Hickman in touch with Work Skills Corp., a Brighton-based facility that offers businesses space to set up production and provides ex-inmates for labor. "So, what

I decided to do to turn this all around was find an organization that had the labor force and then teach them how to make the product," Hickman said.

Since its start, Urban Ashes has grown to have a presence in over 200 shops in 43 states. By September 2014 the business needed its own space to grow and develop and moved from the workshops of Work Skills Corps. to the current location on Ellsworth Street.

Calvin Evans, 47, the human resource and operations manager, has been working with Hickman since 2013, shortly after he was released after serving 24 years.

"We are trying to create this marriage between the ex-felon labor force and people who haven't been convicted of a felony so that we can understand each other's world; we can give each other the best and in turn flourish. But what allows for that is that he (Hickman) has been like a family member to us," Evans said.

Evans has never taken any HR courses and has never been a manager, in the traditional sense of the word. He may not have the academic background, but Evans has managed lives. And what he doesn't know, Hickman is right there to teach him.

"I'm a mentor," Evans said. "I do public speaking. I am a violence intervention specialist and on the Washtenaw County Workforce Development Board. Often I am called upon for my expertise, if you will, based on my experience. I owe people who gave me life when I was in a lifeless condition. I owe it to them to be an example of what we can become once we are removed from our condition.

"Evans believes strongly in the power of education and says that if there was a support system for him growing up, he would have made other choices. He did well in school -- when he went. He also provided all he could for his younger siblings while his mother did what she could for the family. However, he was a product of his surroundings and lived everyday in fear of his family not having enough food to eat or a roof over their head when they returned home from school. He "lived by the code of the street," and made choices to help alleviate his lost sense of security.

During his incarceration, Evans obtained his associates in paralegal studies and worked as a liaison between the administration and the inmates. He also created a processed guide for inmates to obtain college credits.

"Urban Ashes is about saving lives and trees. The life part of it is what I'm about, so I can say to businesses that Urban Ashes has the model for what other businesses can use in order to be productive or to employ from this workforce, from the ex-felon labor pool. While he (Hickman) is taking the business part of it and expanding that, I am expanding the program part. He has allowed and helped me to live my dream of helping the ex-felon labor force," Evans said.



Calvin Evans, 47, has worked for Urban Ashes for two and a half years and was promoted to human resources operations manager six months ago. Evans is committed to improving the lives of ex-felons and assisting them in the transition from incarceration to life outside. Photo by Jan Ziegelman Cohen.