



THE WASHTENAW INDIE AWARDS

THE ANN





WINNER: Big Leap

URBAN ASHES

Owner: Paul Hickman

Founded: 2009

Employees: 1

Website: urbanashes.com

Giving new purpose to lives while repurposing wood

The “big leap” that Paul Hickman is being recognized for is really a series of leaps that are still a work in progress.

His Urban Ashes project, focused locally and throughout Michigan as it got up and running in its first three years, is now expanding onto the national stage.

Urban Ashes makes picture frames from recycled wood. Originally, it was intended as an outlet for the wood left when the emerald ash borer plague hit Michigan a decade ago, killing millions of trees. The project was eventually expanded to include several other species of wood taken from trees that died in urban areas.

Recently Urban Ashes added yet another dimension to its supply of recycled wood by joining with Reclaim Detroit, the organization that is salvaging material from the thousands of abandoned houses being torn down across Detroit. That collection of wood, which Hickman has labeled Detroit De-Nailed, gives new life to lumber that the home-building industry culled from Michigan’s forests in the early part of the last century. Frames made with this wood come with a tag showing the house, the year it was built and any history it may have.

Hickman’s passion for putting together this environmentally friendly mission is matched by his insistence

that it create jobs for Michigan’s transitional/disabled workforce. He paired with Work Skills Corporation, a non-profit in Brighton, to add a frame-manufacturing department to the array of jobs its clients perform, often for the auto industry.

Urban Ashes fits into the trendy category called “social enterprise” – a venture more concerned with social and environmental value than making a profit – but it’s nonetheless a for-profit business. It needs to make money to survive and that’s been a slow curve in the first three years.

The frames, like most items made by hand, can’t be priced to compete with mass-produced competition. If you want cheap frames, they’re all around you, many imported from China and made of “who knows what kind of wood,” Hickman says. He uses several varieties, each with its own distinctive look, including ash, soft maple, Eastern black walnut, American black cherry, basswood, yellow pine and vertical growth Douglas fir from many of the houses in Detroit. The wood is either made into pre-assembled frames for retailers or sold as strips of moulding to framing stores that then construct their own frames. The various styles of pre-made frames come in three sizes – 4x5, 5x7 and 8x10 – and range in price from around \$40 to \$70.

By early 2012, Urban Ashes frames were in only six retail stores around southeast Michigan. Early this year, Hickman focused on expanding the market. He was thrilled to be part of a what’s-hot buzz when he attended a couple of trade shows. At one in Las Vegas, potential retailers were still crowded around his display table long after his next-door vendors had packed up for the evening. Only a few months later, Urban Ashes frames are in 88 stores in 22 states, and counting.

Then there’s a new deal he’s just announced with Holstee, a poster frame manufacturer in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Hickman says 2013 will be a critical year in making Urban Ashes sustainable. Regardless of the financial outcome, he says it’s been gratifying to put together a wide network of collaborators, almost all of them in Michigan, to achieve a worthy goal. He’s particularly proud of creating jobs for people who need them most.

“Urban Ashes defines success in seeing our various crews responsible ... taking tremendous pride and enjoyment in what they are creating,” Hickman said. “In too many cases, this may be the first time in their lives they have this opportunity to truly feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in what they are doing.”