

Reading the signs of the times

Laid-off worker took opportunity to start business

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As the economy continued to sink a year and a half ago, Lane Keen found himself without a job.



Jackie Ricciardi/Staff

Lane Keen, owner of Keen Signs & Graphics, decided to start his own business after he was laid off from his job 1 1/2 years ago.

But being laid off as plant manager at G&K Services in Augusta -- along with about 100 other workers -- ended up being the first step in the birth nine months later of his own business, Keen Signs & Graphics.

"I always thought I wanted to work for myself, but it's hard to pull the trigger when you've got a paycheck and benefits," Keen said. "Once I didn't, if I was ever going to try it, now was the time."

Now open in the 200 block of Robert C. Daniel Jr. Parkway, the shop is situated next to FedEx Office and is part of a busy thoroughfare.

That's intended to draw attention, particularly from businesspeople, Keen said.

"It's a good part of town," he said. "It's a heavily traveled part of town."

The start-up business is introducing new technology and trying to find its niche in the community while providing signs,



Keen Signs client work

banners and other branding materials.

It's part of a network of independent stores, so it can draw from the experience of others, Keen said.

"Starting out -- especially starting out in this economy -- it's been a challenge, but we're growing. People are finding us," he said. "Getting our name out has been the biggest challenge."

FINDING A MATCH

A self-described late bloomer, Keen moved to the area from Pennsylvania in 1987 to work in security at Savannah River Site.

He graduated from the University of South Carolina Aiken in 1995 with a bachelor's degree in business management, then earned his MBA from Auburn University.

He and his wife of 28 years, Pam, have three daughters who all still live in the area.

When Keen decided to open his own business, he wasn't sure which direction he would take.

"My criteria was it had to be something I could afford to get into; it had to be something I could understand; and it had nothing to do with food -- no restaurant," Keen said.

He started to research different industries and found an area sign shop for sale.

Keen didn't buy that business, but it did spark his interest in the field and he realized there were similarities to his previous experience with printing at Solo Cup.

"It's just printing on something different," he said. "Once I started looking at it, it translated very well."

Keen decided to start his sign business on his own and ended up joining the Sign Biz network. The California-based company links independent stores with resources, training and networking opportunities.

A few months after securing a site and a Small Business Administration loan, Keen opened his doors.

Deciding to launch a business requires a person to be "all in," Keen said, and he wanted to test how his skills stood alone.

"You always want to know if you can be successful for yourself like you are for a big corporation," he said.

Keen already has at least one fan in Didier Norris, owner/partner of Best Data Products.

"He's got great turnaround, good pricing. I think he's the best in town because he goes over and beyond the call of duty," Norris said. "I can call him up and tell him I need a rush and he'll get it out. He's never failed. He's very punctual, very conscientious."

CREATING A NICHE

"Some folks come in with a sketch and say, 'Here's what I'm thinking,' and some folks have no idea what they're thinking," Keen said. "We can sit down and work from scratch or take your idea and work it into a logo. Sometimes people have a logo but want a business card or sign."

The business also has done work for the Augusta Metro and Columbia County chambers of commerce, he said.

One of the biggest lessons Keen said he has learned so far is the importance of creating a niche and filling a need in the community.

Keen said the company is planning to expand to target event planners, florists and caterers whose clients might want a banner or sign for an event. Soon those partner companies will be able to offer Keen Signs & Graphics products or their own sites to help simplify customer orders, he said.

"Those folks are buying that somewhere from someone, so why wouldn't you as the event planner try and add that to your product line and make more money with it?" Keen said.

The company also has a new 64-inch metallic ink printer that Keen said is unique to the area and he believes will help people with advertising.

"When you're walking by something and you get that glitter in your eye, it makes you stop and look at it, and then you read the ad," Keen said. "That's the point of advertising: to get you to stop and read it. It does that."

Keen said he wants the company to continue to grow.

"In some ways we've met our expectations -- nothing is ever perfect the way you draw it out on paper," he said. "We're growing. We're getting better. I feel confident that we're going to do well."