

Scrolling Out a Future



Erik Warren works on a scroll saw project. Despite having autism, Erik has his own scrolling business.

Dedicated dad creates scroll saw businesses for handicapped sons

By Kathleen Ryan

When the Warrens discovered that both of their sons were significantly handicapped, they became all the more determined to give them lots of love and help them reach their fullest potentials. They have succeeded on both counts.

Today, 36-year-old Erik (with autism) and 39-year-old Jason (with Williams Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder) each work in a scroll saw-related business. These businesses not only keep the boys happy, but they help ensure a productive life for them, should anything happen to Jim Warren, their dedicated father.

"It's amazing to me how these kids are like night and day," said Jim Warren. "Jason is very social and musically talented." He exhibits intellectual strengths and weaknesses typical of individuals with Williams Syndrome (www.williams-syndrome.org). "Erik is physically capable, but socially inept with very limited verbal skills; 'scroll saw' and 'pizza' are among his understandable words. Yet, they are both a joy and an inspiration to me every single day," Jim continued.

When Erik was in his late teens, a special education teacher got him involved in a woodworking project that required the use of a scroll saw. Erik enjoyed it so much that Jim bought him his own scroll saw, and they learned how to use it together. To everyone's surprise, Erik took to the scroll saw like a duck to water, so Jim set him up with a little shop of his own. Since then, he has produced a myriad of high-quality sports, spiritual, and nature-themed artwork for his business, aptly named Erik Originals™.



Erik, left, Jim Warren, center, and Jason, right, display some of Erik's work.

"A lot of people ask me how I could let Erik be around dangerous equipment. But if there's any tool in woodworking that I feel is safe, it's the scroll saw," Jim said. "Erik nicked himself just once years ago and got really upset about it—it's never happened again."

All Erik Originals are hand cut by Erik before going on to the finishing crew. Erik uses a Hawk scroll saw with a #2 reverse-tooth blade. Most of his framed work is cut in 1/8"-thick Baltic birch plywood, although some of his work is cut in 3/4"-thick aromatic cedar. In addition to his array of patterns, Erik also does some custom work.

"Erik is a visual learner. He rarely allows anyone to do anything for him—not even to get his coat for him. He's very coordinated, and physically strong and capable, with perfect vision, hearing, and smell. He can sniff out a Snickers bar no matter where I try to hide it," laughed Jim. "He's also very mechanically inclined and can do anything I ask him to do. But I've got to be sure to show him correctly the first time, because change is difficult for him. Once we got started on the scroll saw, I just kept giving him harder projects, and he excelled at them all."

The budding artist began selling his work 15 years ago through retailers that Jim was able to convince to display Erik's work. Now he also sells his work online through his website. Last year alone Erik sold well over 1,000 pieces.

According to his father, most people who see Erik's work love it and are impressed with the quality. Those admirers often have no idea that Erik has autism. For Erik, his unique gift is an effective way to help him deal with his compulsions.

"We hide wood from him, because if he sees it, he's got to make something with it—then there's no stopping him. He has been known to work up to 23 hours straight, but he has gotten much better at controlling that urge. He sets his own pace for what he wants to do each day. Then anything he leaves to do for the next day, he'll carry home and take it to his bedroom with him, because he doesn't want anyone doing his work.

"Some people with autism benefit from sensory integration. I think that Erik gets his sensory integration through the scroll saw; that and his one to three long showers every day. It's still somewhat of a mystery to me what makes him tick."

An entrepreneur himself, Jim Warren currently owns an asphalt maintenance company in Hays, KS. Over the years, he has jump-started several other businesses.

"I've always been self-employed, so I could pick up and leave to deal with whatever needs the boys might have," Jim said. "So I was already familiar with the logistics of how to go about setting up businesses in which they could work."

Within the past year, Jim established a company for Jason to work in, called Wonderpaper by Jason™. It was born out of Erik's scroll-sawing business. After years of helping Erik glue patterns onto his wood pieces, Jim stumbled onto some large sheets of self-adhesive paper. He cut the paper to

"We hide wood from Erik, because if he sees it, he's got to make something with it."

“Helping them to feel useful and productive is what it’s all about.”

size, put the sheets into a copy machine like regular paper, then just peeled off the back and applied it to the wood. It worked like a wonder—thus the name Wonderpaper. A single ad in *Scroll Saw Woodworking & Crafts Magazine* generated an international base of more than 200 customers for the new business.

“It took a long time to come up with something that would work for Jason, because Erik’s needs were so demanding. But Jason is an angel and has always been so good about waiting,” Jim mused. “The paper worked out great for Erik, and now Jason can help with a business too. Jason proudly weighs the sheets, puts them in the bags, and takes them to the post office. He tracks his sales on a world map.

“They’re both hard workers,” Jim added. “They’ll get up early each morning and can’t wait to get going and start doing something. Helping them to feel useful and productive is what it’s all about.”

Because Erik cannot be left unattended, Jim enlisted the help of personal assistants for Erik and Jason, to help with their day-to-day activities, including their respective businesses.

“There are four people who work with Jason and Erik who have been with us for years,” Jim said. “They are all CPR and first-aid certified. They are our family. Through a trust agreement, two people have committed to help Erik and Jason for the rest of their lives, should I ever be unable to care for them. It took me a long time to feel that good about anyone.”

Although no one can predict what lies ahead, Jim is very hopeful for the futures of his sons and the businesses. Whatever the future holds, Jim says one thing is certain—they’re in it together.

“It’s been challenging living with these kids, but at the same time it’s been such a joy and very rewarding for me personally. All in all, I’d say it’s been quite a ride!”

Gallery of Work from



A plaque bearing the logo of the Fort Hays State University Tigers.



HORSE PORTRAIT is a pattern from Wooden Teddy Bear.



JESUS IN PRAYER was designed by Enzo Santomaro.



An original design commemorating Kansas University's 2008 basketball championship.



Erik Originals™

Erik Originals was created by Jim Warren to help develop the artistic talents of his son. Erik's artwork includes sports, spiritual, and nature designs. Visitors to his website can view the gallery of his work and watch a video highlighting Erik's life, struggles, and accomplishments, as well as television news clips featuring Erik and his scroll saw work.

For more information on Erik Originals, call Jim Warren at 785-623-7470 or visit the website at www.erikoriginals.com.



Wonderpaper by Jason™

Wonderpaper by Jason is a company started by Jim Warren to help his son, Jason, with the goal of leading a productive life and earning a living. This self-sticking paper was initially designed for use in the production of scroll saw artwork, but has many other applications as well. Jim said the company plans to expand its line by adding several new products, including a clear Wonderpaper. To learn more about Wonderpaper or to place an order, call 785-639-7470 or visit www.wonderpaperbyJason.com.

Learning to Communicate

Marla Staab, Clinical Coordinator in the Department of Communication Disorders at Fort Hays State University, has worked with Erik and Jason since they were toddlers. Marla explained that while individuals diagnosed with autism have difficulty expressing thoughts and ideas, it is not unusual for them to have exceptional talents and skills in music and art.

"His dad has worked hard to find a way for Erik to communicate," Marla said. "Erik is very perceptive. He knows what's going on. The scroll saw is a way for him to express himself and show his talents," she continued.

Families like the Warrens come to the Fort Hays State University Clinic because they want more for their children. But the families who come to the Clinic often give more than they receive. "Those two boys have taught me more about communication than any teacher or book," Marla said. She is thankful to have been invited along on their journey.

To learn more about autism or find local resources, visit www.autismspeaks.org.