



## Blogs Balloon Geek: Trickster's kid-pleasing sculptures transcend mere wiener dogs

By Jonathan Devin

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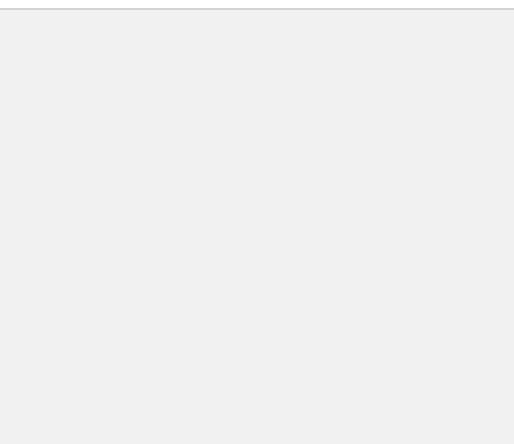
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Balloon sculptor Mike Blumenthal entertains children at Grahamwood Elementary School with creations including this lion headdress worn by Omari Abayomi. His art has afforded Blumenthal the ability to use what he calls his "talent for making people smile."

Sculptors create magnificent works of art out of everything from 24-karat gold to garbage straight from the recycling bin, but one Memphis artist's chosen medium is mostly air.

"I always knew my artistic gene was there, but I just couldn't find it until I stumbled across balloons and learned that I had this talent for making people smile," said Mike Blumenthal of Cordova, also known as Balloon Geek.

Blumenthal, a husband and father of two whose award-winning creations include life-size balloon automobiles, a great white whale, and the starship Enterprise, will represent the Memphis "balloon community" at the annual Twist & Shout Convention, Feb. 16-20 in Massachusetts. This year, he's seen as heavy competition.



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Balloon sculptor Mike Blumenthal entertains children at Grahamwood Elementary School with creations including this lion headdress worn by Omari Abayomi. His art has afforded Blumenthal the ability to use what he calls his "talent for making people smile."



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Sylvia Albert wears a princess balloon headdress crafted by Blumenthal at Grahamwood Elementary. Kids and adults alike get a kick out of Blumenthal's art.



MARK BALZER/SPECIAL TO THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Mike Blumenthal was on the team that helped balloon artist Mark Verge assemble this dinosaur sculpture. The sculpture required 40 hours of labor from the team.



KIM STARNES/SPECIAL TO THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Blumenthal assembled this pink Cadillac with Elvis at the wheel for a '50s-sock-hop-themed conference in San

"Locally, there's no comparison, and nationally, as far as what I've seen in trade magazines, Mike's right there with the best of the best," said Nick Toombs, a Memphis magician who goes by Magic Mr. Nick.

Toombs and Blumenthal met several years ago at a meeting of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, a peer group for tricksters who work parties and events. Back then, magic was Blumenthal's passion, but a lecture on balloons at one meeting in 2006 changed everything.

"I went just to support the club, but they showed us stuff I'd never seen before," said Blumenthal. "They weren't the typical sword and dog twists that you would see at a party. They did a Daffy Duck that looked like Daffy Duck."

Blumenthal won a door prize of an instructional DVD, and soon he was off

and running. He shadowed more experienced balloon artists at events and learned the basics of "twisting" -- taking long tubular balloons and twisting them into animals.

He quickly tired of wiener dogs, though.

Because his day job as a programmer/analyst at First South Financial Credit Union in Bartlett offered him the opportunity to travel, he began calling on nationally known balloon artists like Larry Moss, who holds a world record for balloon sculpture creation, and Mark Verge, a Canadian whose niche is constructing complex dinosaur skeletons for museums.

In 2007 in Chicago, Blumenthal worked on Verge's team at the Twist & Shout Convention to create a dinosaur skeleton that was 42 feet long, 15 feet tall and involved more than 1,000 woven balloons.

"I spent 40 hours with him nonstop, twisting and inflating," said Blumenthal. "His room was a sea of balloons with pieces of dinosaur all over the place. My job was to inflate the balloons, and he would show me how to twist the vertebrae."

Since then, Blumenthal has won city-wide competitions in Memphis and St. Louis with creations all his own. More important, balloon sculpting has turned into a thriving second job.



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Diego.

"Mike is always a great complement to our themes and is always a crowd-pleaser," said Elizabeth Allen, marketing manager of The Avenue Carriage Crossing. "(At events) his line is always the longest. There's balloon art, and there's Balloon Geek art."

Allen said Blumenthal's creations cast their spell on children and grown-ups. She has hired him to make reindeer, a Monster Mash convertible big enough for people to sit in, and a Charlie Brown Great Pumpkin that people could walk through.

"(His art) is something that you always remember," Allen said.

Blumenthal uses durable, biodegradable balloons that are designed especially for balloon artists whose work may take days to complete. Larger pieces usually require the construction of a frame made of PVC pipes or conduits to hold them up. Rarely does he use helium for a sculpture.

Balloon artists local and around the country meet for "jams," in which they discuss techniques and designs. Traveling jams or "T-jams" criss-cross the country every year.

At this year's convention, which will be held outside Boston, Blumenthal plans to unveil a technique of his own creation called the "stacked X-weave," essentially layers of basket-woven balloons.

Ingenuity, originality and the wow factor are the criteria that determine the winner.

Of course, balloons aren't the most versatile of artistic media.

"I can't tell you how many times I've headed down a path and it's not working and I've had to stop, re-evaluate where I am and how much time I have and redesign it and make it work," said Blumenthal.

"Balloons have a mind of their own. You have to be the balloon whisperer. You have to let it guide you, you can't guide the balloon."

Toombs said having the dual nature of energetic crowd-pleaser and hyper-focused detail person is crucial in competitive balloon art. He assisted Blumenthal in the construction of a pink Cadillac with Elvis figure at the wheel in San Diego, the minutiae of which took days to sort out.

"With the Elvis, the body was a simple structure, but Mike had made two or three faces before he even got us to the venue," said Toombs. "I remember on the night of the build, he made two or three more before he was satisfied."

But Blumenthal said even if he does become the "Top Twister" at the convention this year, he hasn't forgotten why he got into balloon art in the first place.

"What really hooked me was when I made my first three-twist dog and handed it to this little girl and she turned and smiled at me," said Blumenthal. "I had never had that feeling before in my life."

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