

THE LITCHFIELD COUNTY TIMES

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County's Big Showing at the Big E

By MANON L. MIRABELLI

WEST SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — Every year for 17 days, Joe Cieslowski, Jerry Chirico, Commerford's Zoo animals and Reidman's children's wear set-up shop at the Eastern States Exposition where they do brisk business.

Cieslowski, of Connecticut Woodcarvers Gallery in East Canaan, creates hand-carved signs and gifts by custom order from his booth in Craft Commons at the Big E. He has been doing it for 37 years and looks forward to his return each year.

"I love coming here," he said. "There are people who come through that gate with me on their list. I feel like a state building."

Customers, Cieslowski explained, come to his booth and order hand-carved signs for their homes. They can pick the shape, color and size and can opt for gold or silver leaf in lieu of paint. He then creates the original piece in his studio in East Canaan and ships it to the buyer.

"This is not an instant gratification

booth," he said. "This is delayed gratification."

The prices he charges range from \$100 and up with the average sign costing about \$175. The cost, Cieslowski said, is comparable to other sign makers, but he believes the quality of his is superior.

"People have to have a number on their house, and if they want something special, they come here," he said. "They have it, forget it and love it forever."

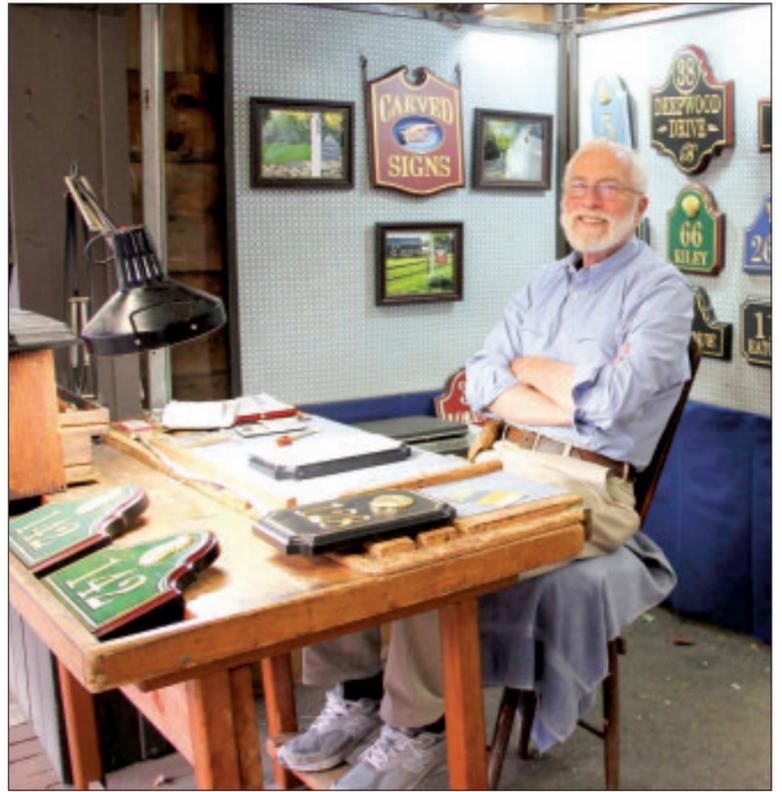
A self-taught carver who has been published in trade journals, Cieslowski first tried his hand at the craft as a Boy Scout when he was 9 years old.

"At 14 I was teaching wood carving and selling my pieces," he noted.

Fast-forward to adulthood, and Cieslowski found himself teaching industrial arts at Windsor High School when he decided to leave the teaching profession and dedicate himself to the art of custom wood-carving.

"I left teaching in 1979, and I've never regretted it," he said.

Chirico, owner of Green Mountain Stove Company in New Hartford, is an-



Photos by Manon L. Mirabelli

East Canaan resident Joe Cieslowski, creator of hand-carved signs and gifts, at his booth in Craft Commons at the Big E in West Springfield, Mass.

other longtime Big E exhibitor. He has been selling wood and pellet stoves in the Better Living Center for 22 years and enjoys every minute of the 17 days he spends there.

"This is great exposure," he said. "I probably see a million people."

Chirico does pretty well, he said without elaborating.

"I don't want to jinx myself by talking about it too much," he said.

Right around the corner from Chirico's stove booth is Reidman's, of Torrington, where fairgoers can find qual-

ity children's wear, rain gear, toys and books.

Out on the fairgrounds, Commerford's Zoo, of Goshen, advertises the world's biggest pig and horse, both of which are located in individual trailers and can only be seen by paying a \$1 entrance fee.

The Big E is open most days from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. through Oct. 4. Most exhibits and buildings open at 10 a.m. Admission is \$10 for adults and \$8 for children 6-12. Parking is \$10. For more information, visit www.thebig.com.



Jerry Chirico, of Green Mountain Stove Company in New Hartford, at his booth at the Big E in the Better Living Center in West Springfield, Mass.



Reidman's, of Torrington, enjoys good business in the Better Living Center at the Big E in West Springfield, Mass. during the fair's 17-day run.

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