

With stunning detail, Sign Design's 3D UV printer creates ADA-compliant signage for its sister company, Adaptive Signage.



# SIGNS OF SUCCESS

Backed with 3D technology, New York's *Sign Design* is ready for nationwide market

by Dave Dondoneau

**T**here are a million clichés to describe Joe Lanza's climb to success, and none are wrong. "Adversity doesn't build character, it reveals it." "Get knocked down nine times, get up 10."

That's Lanza, owner of the burgeoning *Sign Design* company in Port Chester, N.Y. His firm is on the verge of becoming a national player in the competitive market of sign design.

These are good days for Lanza. His company just invested over \$150,000 on a state-of-the-art, 3D UV color printer system that gives Sign Design the ability to quickly churn out ADA-compliant signs with raised letters and braille content. With the printer, Sign Design can make an individual sign for clients or do bulk orders—and the staff can do it all in half the time and half the cost compared to the old way of doing things.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. LANZA

"Our motto is 'A Better Look, A Better Price,'" Lanza says. "From the moment 3D technology came out, I always said, 'When it becomes available to our industry, I'll buy one.' It's finally here and it's a game changer for us. We're one of maybe 80 in the entire United States [that owns one] and there are over 55,000 sign-related companies."

Lanza doesn't take it for granted.

## BATTLING THROUGH

Professionally and personally, Lanza has had his share of adversity since selling his prized BMW in 1989 to start his own business with his late wife, Marie, who passed in 2011 after a long battle with ovarian cancer.

"Her determination kept her in the fight that long," Lanza says. "Cancer is horrible. Some people don't realize it doesn't just affect the patient. It affects the family and friends who stay with them."

He adds, "At one point, when my wife was sick, I had to take a second mortgage on the house just to make payroll and even then, I didn't know if that would be enough. I had to pay my guys and still support the family."

Lanza stayed away from dating for two years, filling the void his wife left by heading to Manhattan to research signage and new technology. At one sign convention, he and five friends found out that the History Channel's Mike Wolfe, perhaps the most famous sign picker on the planet, was going to be a featured speaker. The group put together six blown-up headshots of Wolfe's partner, Frank Fritz, then sat in the front row and held them up as Wolfe began speaking.

"He loved it," Lanza recalls, laughing. "He came over and talked to us about the sign business. Just a great guy."

Lanza fell in love with sign design by following in the footsteps of his dad, who made a living hand-painting signage. It's something he always wanted to do, but with more of a manufacturing background, Lanza wanted to take sign design to another level.

"It's not an easy business because there are so many sign companies out there," he says. "We're a business that takes pride in doing the work professionally so [that our products] look clean and perfect."



Sign Design founder Joe Lanza enjoys a weekend retreat at Vieques Island.

## PERSEVERANCE DESPITE MORE PAIN

In 2013, Lanza started to find a balance with the business and his personal life. That's when his nephew came to his house for a visit and urged Lanza to look at online dating profiles for the first time.

"You have to create a profile in order to look at others, so I did a very generic one," he says. "By the next morning I had seven messages and just began talking to women again. That's how I met Adrienne Skinner, my girlfriend. We hit it off over coffee and just kept going."

Two months into the relationship, Skinner went to the doctor because she hadn't been feeling well.

The news wasn't good: Skinner was diagnosed with the rare and deadly ampullary cancer that starts in the bile duct. There was no standard treatment and, at one point, an attempt to remove the cancer surgically was cancelled because it had spread too far throughout her body.

"The reality for me sunk in right away because I had just been there," Lanza says. "I didn't expect good things, but I was going to stick with her through difficult times."

This is where life gets good.





A hole needed to be cut into the Sign Design office roof so that a crane could be used to lower a new DCS 3D UV printer into the space.



This state-of-the-art 3D printer allows Sign Design to do precise and vibrant signs, both individual and en masse.

## BEATING CANCER

Skinner, now 60, was sent to Johns Hopkins in Philadelphia to take part in a clinical trial. She went there every two weeks and took the drug KEYTRUDA®, manufactured by Merck & Co., and today she is cancer free. The New York Times earlier this year ran a story on the cancer drug and Skinner's miracle recovery. While it doesn't work for all cancer patients—only about 4 percent right now—it gives hope to many and shows there are cures to keep working toward.



Sign Design founder Joe Lanza (right) and his girlfriend, Adrienne Skinner, a cancer survivor, now take the time to enjoy life as well as a growing business.

"I'm so proud of her," Lanza says. "She's been asked to speak as a civilian in Washington, D.C., on behalf of the drug. I hope more people can benefit from it."

In part, because of all of the struggles, Lanza isn't afraid to take calculated chances in his business.

When the 3D printer became available less than a year ago, he ordered the machine, and when it arrived at his company's new building, he decided he wanted it in the upstairs office. The machine cost was just over \$100,000; but by the time he moved it in, costs hit nearly \$200,000.

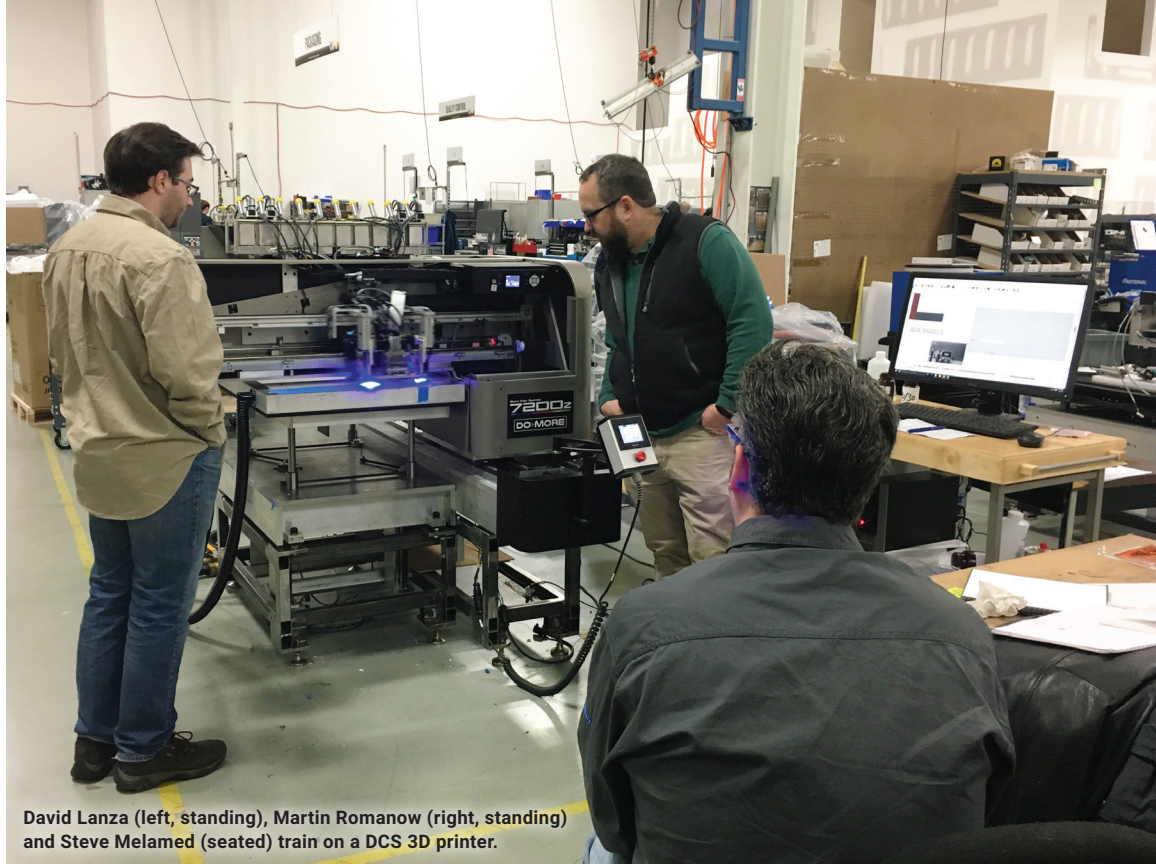
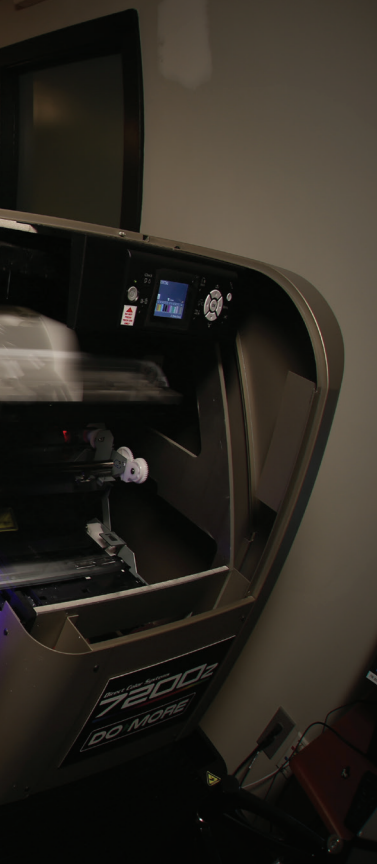
Since there was no way to get the 2,100-pound behemoth through the door and up the stairs, Lanza got creative. He had workers cut a large hole in his roof, through the beams, the electrical wiring and vents. He reinforced the floor and then had a crane brought in to lower it through the roof and place it in the building.

The rewards for that ingenuity were nearly instantaneous.

Where Sign Design used to shy away from making braille or ADA signs because of the amount of time they took to create, it is now a lucrative market the company seeks on a national level.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF J. LANZA (TOP LEFT); STEVE MELAMED (TOP CENTER); JEFF MCELNEA (BOTTOM)





David Lanza (left, standing), Martin Romanow (right, standing) and Steve Melamed (seated) train on a DCS 3D printer.

## LIFE IN 3D IS GOOD

From starting the business as a one-man show in 1989, Lanza now has 17 employees. He has designers with architecture and building backgrounds as well as engineers and computer design experts.

Robert McGuinness, an Asset Manager for Kite Realty Group, says his company was one of the first to put Sign Design's 3D technology to work for some modifications to elevator directory signage that needed braille printing.

"This past year we did a big renovation and we probably use them once a week right now," McGuinness says. "Whenever we have a project that needs signs, we use them because their design work is fantastic. I can give them an idea and they'll put it together and it will be amazing. I can tell you I've been working with [Lanza] for 10 years and have never been disappointed."

Sign Design will soon be unveiling an e-commerce site for national sales as well as an online component where clients can design their own signs. The latter is expected to be ready by the spring.

"I just love this business and I think the best way I can describe why is when I was with my son in Italy after my

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**"I love going down a street and seeing the signs we make. We make a difference and leave our mark."**

**Joe Lanza, Owner,  
Sign Design**

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wife passed," Lanza says. "We were in a hotel and the TV was on in the background and he was asking why I like doing this. Just then, the news cut to police cars back here in our area. I don't remember the story, but I pointed to the TV and said to my son: 'We did the lettering for all those police cars.' That's why I do it. I love going down a street and seeing the signs we make. We make a difference and leave our mark." 🍷

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