

hp BUSINESS



Steps in a new direction



By MICHAEL ELIASOHN
H-P Correspondent

Wood stairs leading from a home at the top of a lake bluff or river bank to the water below look picturesque, but they come with a need for continual maintenance and eventual replacement.

Ed Hunt of St. Joseph and Farren Laurens of South Haven both say they have found a better way.

Independently, they designed and now build stair systems that move with the changing environment and don't decay.

Hunt is a licensed contractor and carpenter with more than 35 years experience. Laurens started his business in 2000 doing artistic metal work and progressed to "doing all kinds of things."

Traditional wood stairs, Hunt explained, are anchored to concrete footings at the top and bottom and in-between.

But when the earth moves due to wind, waves, changing water levels or ice, the concrete footings move. When that happens, Hunt said, the stairs "are going to twist and bend and tear apart. This is very evident along Lake Michigan and St. Joseph River banks."

Even without the twisting, wood stairs eventually will deteriorate due to the elements.

Laurens said customers have told him they spend \$1,000 to \$2,000 a year to maintain their wood stairs.

It was in 2009 when a customer asked Hunt to repair his no-longer-useable wood steps running from his house down to Lake Michigan. In-



stead, Hunt built new stairs using different materials, but not easily assembled or installed, he discovered.

That got him thinking, and the result was his improved Versatile Stair System. He installed the first one in 2010 and four more since, in an area stretching from Stevensville to South Haven.

Laurens said it was five or six years ago when a Hagar Shores property owner asked him to build new stairs down the bluff to Lake Michigan. "It seems like (I've built) about six systems along Lake Michigan now."

He and Hunt have taken different approaches to creating stair systems that aren't rigidly anchored to several concrete footings.

The visual difference is that Laurens' Aluminum Stair System is all aluminum, while Hunt uses steps made of composite material that look like wood, which are bolted to 10-foot long aluminum sections.

Laurens uses one concrete anchor, "a big one," partially buried at the top of the bluff. Non-rusting steel cables link the anchor and the top of the stairs, so the stairs "hang" from the anchor. The steps attach to 20-foot long aluminum sections.

In contrast, Hunt screws

TOP: A view of Ed Hunt's stairs, with the St. Joseph River in the background. The old wood stairs from the top of the river bank were in good-enough condition to remain, but now terminate at a platform he built midway. The new stairs extend from the platform to the river. ABOVE: This is one of the half-dozen all-aluminum stair systems Farren Laurens has built for property owners along Lake Michigan. The longest was 250 feet. LEFT: Ed Hunt stands on a Versatile Stair System he erected in St. Joseph Township, extending down to the St. Joseph River. The old wood stairs, which the new system replaced, are in the background.

Photos by Michael Eliasohn / H-P correspondent

"earth anchors" — two 4-foot long steel rods with 6-inch diameter plates at the end — into the ground at the top of the bluff or bank and if need be, at the bottom and in-between.

Plastic-covered steel cables attach to eyelets at the protruding ends of the earth anchors and to the stair assembly to hold it in place.

Both builders' stairs use aluminum "feet" resting on the surface to support the structure.

"I'm not excavating," Hunt said. "I'm not disturbing the bluff. It's evident if you excavate into the bluff, you're promoting erosion."

Usually once a year, Hunt or the homeowner need to do some maintenance, such as adjusting support lengths if the aluminum feet sink into the ground, or if the ground is washed away underneath.

Laurens described his Aluminum Stair Systems as "maintenance free," but provides free service for two years if anything needs fixing. After that, he charges a fee.

Regarding cost, he said as an example, his Aluminum Stair System might cost \$10,000, versus \$5,000 for traditional wood stairs, but the owner ultimately will save money because of the negli-

gible maintenance costs.

Hunt said the materials used for his Versatile Stair System cost perhaps 35 percent more than for wood stairs, but that's considerably offset by the reduced amount of labor required, in contrast to wood steps.

Hunt, who continues to do projects for homeowners, such as remodeling kitchens and building decks, assembles the stairs in his garage at home. For one bigger project, he rented space. The largest stair system he has installed so far is 100 feet. Laurens' longest one is 250 feet.

Hunt said because of his website, www.versatilestair.com, he's had inquiries from outside of Southwest Michigan. He said he's hoping demand warrants setting up a manufacturing facility in the Twin Cities, then shipping assembled stair sections to builders elsewhere in the country to install.

Laurens' business, Farren's Metal Works and Aluminum Stair Systems, makes almost anything from aluminum, including custom-designed furniture, gates and other outdoor structures, artwork and railings and stairs for industry and the military. He has two employees. His website is www.aluminumstair.com.

Michigan Works names new staff

BENTON HARBOR — Michigan Works of Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties has announced changes in its leadership team.

Gwen Wood has been named chief operating officer, and Megan McCausland has been hired as director of community relations.

"We're fortunate to add two highly experienced and qualified people to an already talented team," said Todd Gustafson, executive director. "Gwen Wood and Megan McCausland will undoubtedly help us provide a skilled work force that meets the needs of employers."

Wood has been acting as interim COO for the past year.

Previously the COO for Michigan Works The Job Force Board in the Central Upper Peninsula of Michigan, she comes to the tri-county area with 24 years' experience in strengthening Michigan's work force, the agency said in a news release. She has provided leadership in numerous work force development initiatives throughout the

state and is a founding member of the Upper Peninsula Healthcare Roundtable. Wood is active in various organizations, including the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals and the Michigan Economic Developers Association, which awarded her the 2010 President's Award.

McCausland, a native of the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph area, recently returned to the area from Los Angeles where she was a program manager for the Center for Civic Education. She has a bachelor's degree in English from Hope College and a master's degree in social and public policy from Georgetown University.

McCausland assumes community outreach responsibilities as longtime Michigan Works spokeswoman Candice Elders relocates to Kalamazoo to serve as a public relations specialist for Bronson Hospital, Gustafson said.

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NEW IN BUSINESS

Barbershop opens in Stevensville

STEVENSVILLE — There's only one brother working at Ruff Brothers Barber Shop, but that will soon change.

Bob Ruff, 23, opened the shop at 5113 Red Arrow Highway Aug. 2. He will be joined in October by his brother, Rich, 27, who currently operates Ruff Cuts in Coloma, which will close.

Their mother, Debbie Ruff, said her third son, Ryan, 22, is attending Barber/Styling College of Lansing and will join his brothers after he graduates in a year.

Ruff Brothers Barber Shop is in the former Cajun take-out restaurant building between Red Arrow Hobbies and Trends Hair Studio, a short distance south of the new Meijer store.

The shop is open Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturdays from 8 to 3. Haircuts start at \$10.

Walk-ins or appointments are accepted. Call 428-2887 to make an appointment.

Debbie Ruff said her sons were inspired to become barbers by their grandfather, Adolph Ruff, now retired, who owned a barbershop in Fairplain Plaza.

Bob, who is the owner of the business and building, also graduated from the barber college in Lansing. Rich graduated from Success Barber School in Merrillville, Ind.

Coin Express Laundry opens in Hartford

HARTFORD — Jeremiah Smith of South Haven did his research before deciding to open a coin-operated laundry in Hartford.

He opened Coin Express Laundry June 29 in a new building at 202 W. Main St. downtown. It's open every day from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

All the washers and dryers are Speed Queen energy-efficient Energy Star rated. Coin Express has a full-time attendant, offers wash and fold service and has free WiFi and a flat-screen television.

Smith said that in doing his research he first considered what businesses are "necessary," and after deciding a coin-operated laundry met that criteria, focused on where to locate it.

He said he decided on Hartford, even though there already was such a laundry in town (Hartford Wash-N-Dri at 519 E. Main) because of the large migrant population working in the area and the soon-to-open Four Winds Hartford casino, which he expects will boost the town's population.

Smith used the services of Cornerstone Alliance Small Business Services in Benton Harbor to have all signs translated into Spanish.

Everything posted inside is in English and Spanish.

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Postal Service considers cutting 120,000 jobs

By RANDOLPH E. SCHMID
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The financially strapped U.S. Postal Service is considering cutting as many as 120,000 jobs.

Facing a second year of losses totaling \$8 billion or more, the agency also wants to pull its workers out of the retirement and health benefits covering federal workers and set up its own benefit systems.

Congressional approval

would be needed for either step, and both could be expected to face severe opposition from postal unions which have contracts that ban layoffs.

The post office has cut 110,000 jobs over the last four years and is currently engaged in eliminating 7,500 administrative staff. In its 2010 annual report, the agency said it had 583,908 career employees.

The loss of mail to the Internet and the decline in advertising caused by the re-

cession have rocked the agency.

Postal officials have said they will be unable to make a \$5.5 billion payment to cover future employee health care costs due Sept. 30. It is the only federal agency required to make such a payment but, because of the complex way government finances are counted, eliminating it would make the federal budget deficit appear \$5.5 billion larger.

If Congress doesn't act and current losses continue,

the post office will be unable to make that payment at the end of September because it will have reached its borrowing limit and simply won't have the cash to do so, the agency said earlier.

In that event, Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe said, "Our intent is to continue to deliver the mail, pay our employees and pay our suppliers."

Postal officials have sought congressional assistance repeatedly over the last few years, including re-

quests to be allowed to end Saturday mail delivery, and several bills have been proposed, but none has been acted on.

In addition the post office recently said it is considering closing 3,653 post offices, stations and other facilities, about one-tenth of its offices around the country, in an effort to save money. Offices under consideration for closing are largely rural with little traffic.

And in June the post office suspended contribu-

tions to its employees' pension fund, which it said was overfunded.

In its 2010 annual report the post office reported a loss of more than \$8 billion on revenues of \$67 billion and expenses of \$75 billion.

And even while total mail volume fell from 202 billion items to 170 billion from 2008 to 2010 the number of places the agency has to deliver mail increased by 1.7 million as Americans built new homes, offices and businesses.