

# Bruce Buckley

Berwyn, Illinois

**Shop name:** Chicagold Sign Company **Age:** 47 **Staff:** Bruce works alongside his friend and mentor, Robert Frese **Web site:** [www.chicagoldsigns.com](http://www.chicagoldsigns.com)

**S**ignCraft has been a big part of my life ever since I read those first black-and-white issues back in 1980. I remember thinking, “Wow! There is actually a magazine about signs!” The first issue I received featured Emmette Morelli grinning ear-to-ear on the cover.



Well, a lot has happened in my life since that time. In those days I was doing sign work out of a little studio in my parents’ home here in Berwyn, Illinois while

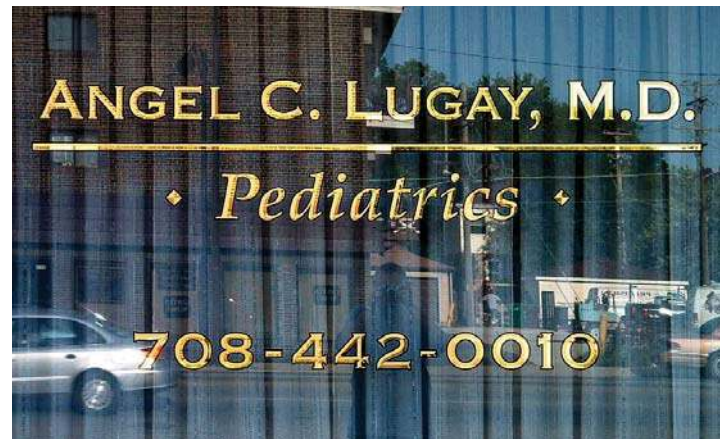
attending Columbia College in Chicago. I had actually started my own little sign service back in 1972—I was 12, then—with a few flyers run off the copy machine at the Berwyn Public Library.

I think the head librarian was annoyed that I was using so much copy paper, but the library actually became my first customer! I did a series of posters for their book reviews and charged them \$2 each. Then I began to get other clients—Harasek’s Pharmacy, O’Brien the Cleaner, Hicks Hardware—all the “biggies”. I guess the local shopkeepers were amused by this 12-year-old kid trying to start his own business, and decided to give me a break.

Anyway, I did signs all through high school and college as a way to earn some spending money and help out with tuition. Both my folks were artists, so materials and studio space were always plentiful as was encouragement from my parents—as long as I didn’t



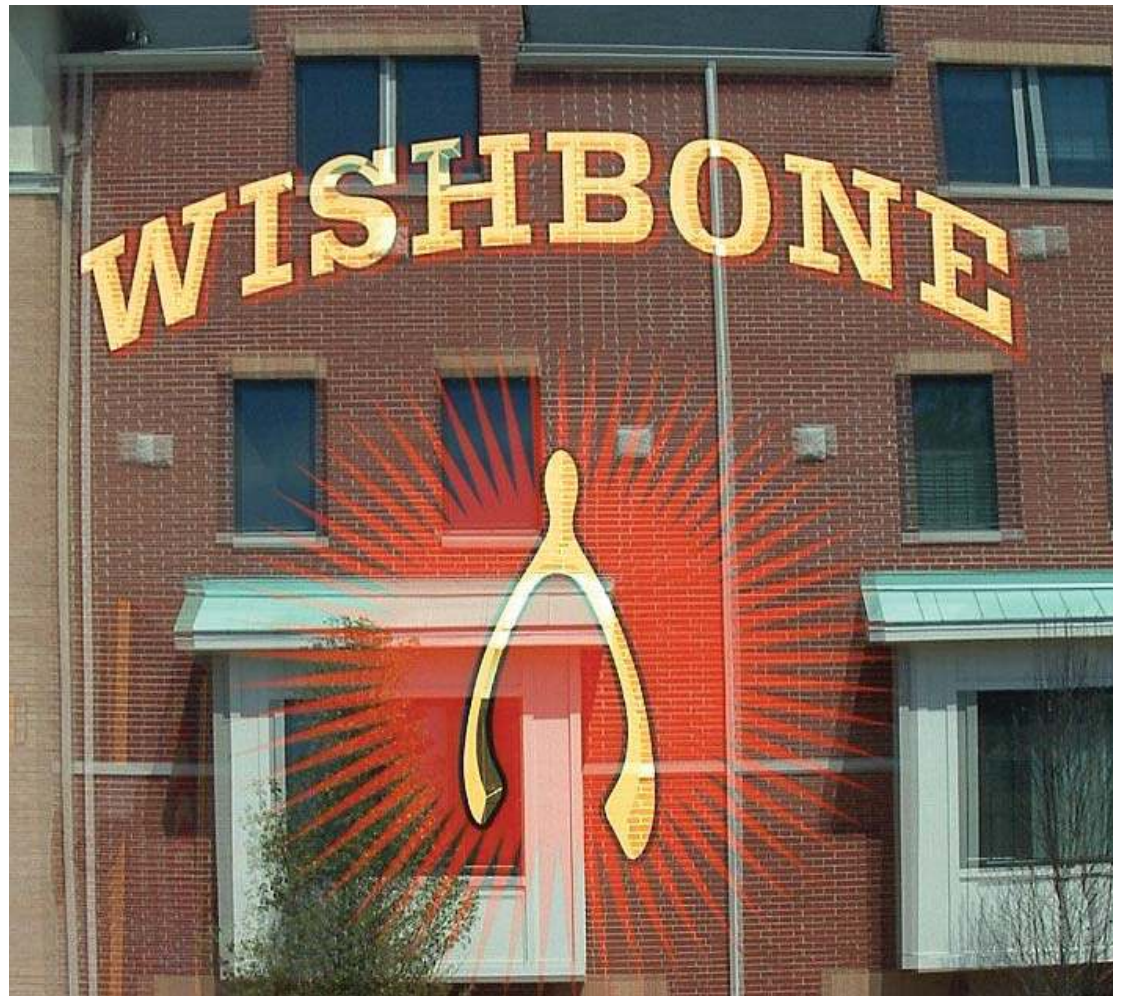
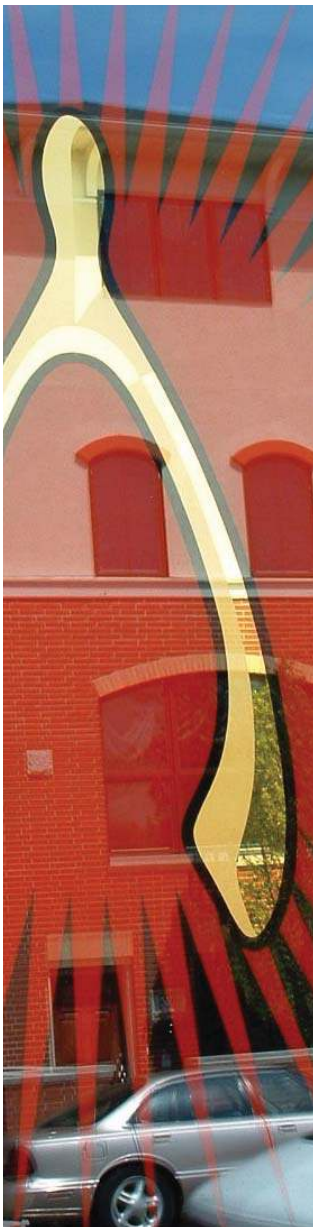
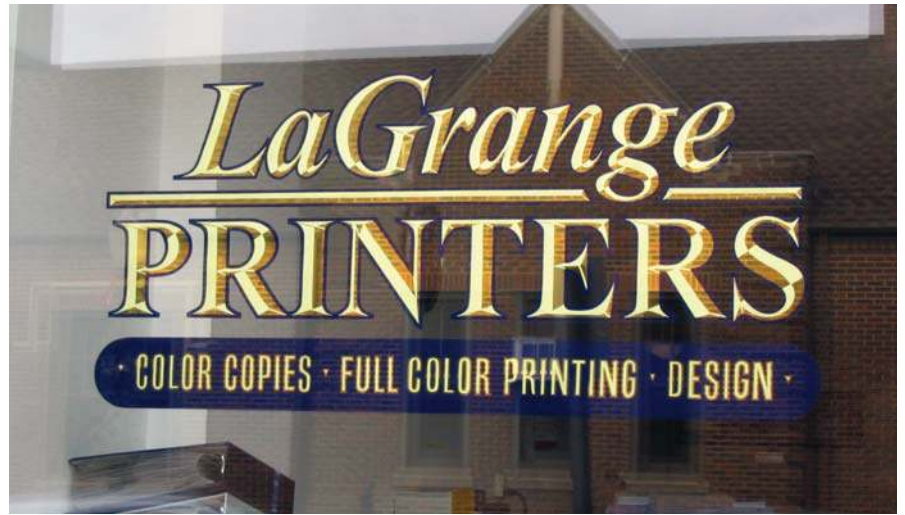
“Bob Behounek was a real celebrity to me. I couldn’t believe he was standing on my front porch telling me what great work I’d done.”

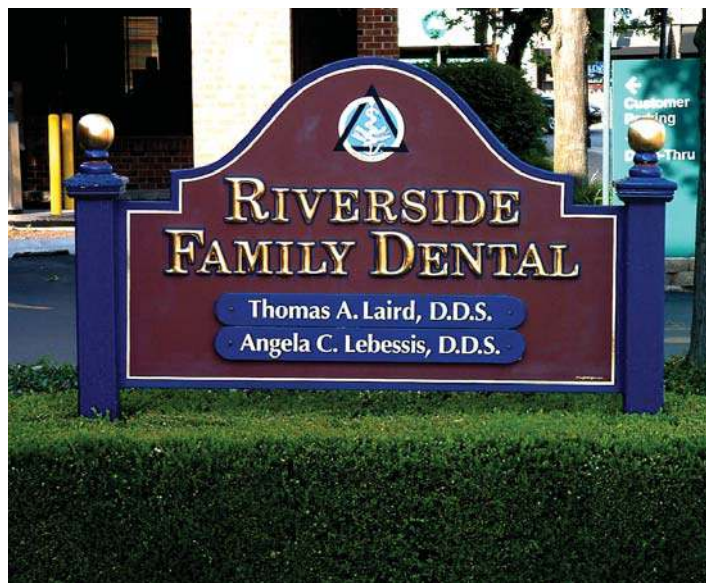


grow up to be “just a sign painter”. My well-meaning parents thought that sign painters were on the lowest rung of the artistic ladder and hoped I would aspire to something greater.

So I went into broadcasting. That’s right, I became a disc jockey. (How’s that for respectability?) I graduated with a B.A. in broadcast communications from Columbia, and decided to give it a try. It turned into a twenty-year career and I had the opportunity to work for some pretty big Chicago stations.

All the while I kept up my subscription to *SignCraft* and continued doing signwork whenever I could squeeze it in. I was determined to improve my lettering abilities, and became fascinated with gold leaf work. The discovery





of *Gold Leaf Techniques* by Raymond LeBlanc [the fourth edition by Kent H. Smith is available at [www.signcraft.com](http://www.signcraft.com)] was a true revelation to me—I spent hours and hours poring over that book.

Before long I was experimenting on the windows of my home while my indulgent parents just shook their heads in wonderment. Eventually I sold some gold leaf window jobs around town at bargain prices just to get some experience. They actually ended up looking pretty good, but took forever to complete.

Around this time Bob Behounek, another Berwyn resident, came knocking on my door. He spotted a banner I had done for a local business and decided to look me up. Bob was a real celebrity to me, and I couldn't believe he was standing on my front porch telling me what great work I'd done. Bob has been a good friend ever since, and a great source of encouragement and inspiration to all of us.

I met Robert Frese [*SignCraft*, September/October 1992] not long after he was first featured in *SignCraft*. I was surprised to see he was right here in Chicago, and called him up to arrange a visit to his shop. We've been best friends ever since. His shop was filled with a dazzling array of gold leaf pieces, and Robert knew every gilding trick there was. I was deeply involved in my radio career, and didn't seriously consider working in the sign field at that time, but Robert and I stayed in touch and got together occasionally to exchange techniques and ideas.

Then, one day, it happened—I was fired. The station where I worked as a production director was way over budget and suddenly I was out of a job. With a wife, a mortgage, and a 5-year-old son, my first instinct was to try to pick up more radio work in Chicago, but nothing clicked. My wife and I wanted to stay in the area, but what to do for money? One thing led to another, and soon Robert and I began collaborating on sign projects.

Now, four years later, Robert and I are collaborators specializing in gold leaf work. We are two of a small handful of artists offering this type of work in Chicago. We feel this is our “golden” opportunity to market our rather unique talents to those who demand something better. We're kindred spirits who are deeply passionate about the beauty and value of gilded lettering. •SC

—From an interview with John McLtrot

