

## Apple Signs marks 30 years

By Margeaux Corby, Staff Writer

Thirty years ago, a 19-year-old college dropout saw signs.

But instead of crop circles, Jim Applegate saw fabricated metal logos and sandblasted entryways he wanted to construct.

“I started as a teenager painting names on trucks and boats, right out of high school,” he said. “I’ve always been a skilled doodler.”

In June 1979, Applegate founded Apple Signs, Inc. in an abandoned gas station on the corner of Bay Ridge Road.



Rodger Farrow, an Apple Signs, Inc. employee since 2007, installs LED lights inside a large lower-case letter “a” at its Millersville plant. *The Capital photo*

“Back then I had no idea how the sign business would change or how far I’d get into it in 30 years,” he said.

The company is now housed in a 23,000-square-foot facility on two acres of land, employs 28 workers and fabricates signs that decorate the county.

The company’s work can be seen all over: The welcome sign to Annapolis along Rowe Boulevard. Bold lettering labeling the various Anne Arundel Medical Center buildings. A glowing sign identifying The Italian Market and Restaurant.

Phil Park, senior project manager at Apple Signs, has been with Applegate 23 years, making him the longest-serving employee at the company.

“You see results of your work when you drive around town,” he said. “Something you can point out and say, ‘I made that.’”

Applegate has seen the sign industry morph from hand-carved creations to illuminated structures that tower over city streets. He said quickly adapting to three decades worth of technology changes is critical to the continued success of his business.

“If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you always got,” he said. “If you’re not changing, not embracing new technology, not embracing the way technology can make jobs get done faster with a higher quality and better project margin, you’re going to get left in the dust.”

Bob Burdon, president of the Annapolis and Anne Arundel Chamber of Commerce, said the company’s success speaks volumes about their community involvement.

“When we look at Apple Signs and the ownership of Apple Signs and what they have done in the industry and broader community is demonstrative, not only of their commitment to their project and industry, but to the surrounding community,” Burdon said. “Living that commitment day in and day out gives the 30 years of longevity they have enjoyed.”

Applegate attributes his company’s vitality to the relationships he has forged with clients, who have helped guide and shape the company evolution.

“Our job is not only to create an attractive sign, but also to take away the headaches that come with fabricating it,” he said.

Rick Morgan, president of CommerceFirst Bank, said he’s known Applegate for about 20 years and used his services to make signs for all five of the bank’s offices.

I don’t hesitate to pick up the phone and ask for ideas about how to make our signs better,” Morgan said. “I haven’t found anything he couldn’t do.”