

# THE SECOND FRONT PAGE

## Entrepreneurial Spirit Alive and Well at E & S Graphics

Ithaca Company Honored With  
'Michigan Celebrates' Award

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When building a business, a job well done usually leads to more business. With a long-held passion for entrepreneurship, Nick Houghton is taking Ithaca-based E & S Graphics to new heights. In early April, the company was recognized as one of the 2021 winners of the Michigan Small Business Development Center Best Small Business award. They'll pick up the prize at the 17th annual Michigan Celebrates Small Businesses event on Tuesday, July 20.

Houghton purchased E & S Graphics six years ago, hoping to modernize and expand a print-focused business originally launched in 1979. After getting his feet wet in printing and solidifying a transition into the digital print world, Houghton, just two years later, purchased Signs for the Times in downtown Ithaca. He added a third business after buying the Trophy Shoppe in Alma after that.

Now with essentially four business buckets, including print, signage, engravings (trophies), and promotional projects, E & S looks to maintain its growth at a steady rate. With its Industrial Park location, E & S primarily serves small to mid-sized businesses mainly in Gratiot, Isabella, and Midland counties. The Shepherd native appreciates having work close to home, even as the company looks to spread farther into Michigan.

### Startup standout

Houghton has always had a few irons in the fire. A graduate of Shepherd High School, he enrolled in Central Michigan University's entrepreneurship program, though he would finish up at Davenport, clearly focused on what he wanted to do in business. "I have a marketing background and my passion is taking marketing ideas and seeing them come to life," he said.

He started breathing life into his new businesses with the help of existing employees who predated him at those places. At one point, a few of the E & S workers had a collective 100 years of professional experience. As they headed toward retirement, those Baby Boomer employees helped train the new hires that work there now. Today, Houghton has eight fulltime employees and four part-timers. Among them are graphic artists, sign makers, engravers, and installers. A penchant for artistic renderings and knowledge of production usually serves these folks well in their jobs.

The award from the Michigan Small Business Development Center (SBDC) is particularly gratifying because it recognizes the company's commitment to clients. The SBDC provides small businesses with low-cost training and counseling support. They strive to provide Michigan with new jobs and aim to increase economic growth by assessing and meeting the needs of small businesses. SBDC works with a multitude of clients ensuring that they are able to reach their full potential and create an impact along the way.

To be recognized as a "Best Small Business," awardees must be a Michigan SBDC client. Each of the Michigan SBDC Regional Centers submit one company to be recognized. Representing all regions of the state and a diverse range of industries, companies like E & S Graphics, Inc. are known for their ability to persevere through challenging times, their entrepreneurial drive, and their hunger for innovation.

"In this past year, Michigan small businesses have been tested like never before," said J.D. Collins, state director, Michigan SBDC. "They've shown remarkable resilience, creativity, and the ability to adapt to an ever-changing climate. From the 140 business consultants at the Michigan SBDC, cheers to your grit and determination, congratulations to this year's awardees. It's an honor serving you."



Ithaca-based E & S Graphics was recognized as one of the 2021 winners of the Michigan Small Business Development Center Best Small Business award. (Herald photos - Meiners)

As for getting the honor from SBDC, Houghton said he was told they had a record number of entries this year, so he "feels blessed to win the award."

### Signature signage, printing on-demand

Though good fortune is often the by-product of hard work. What's the biggest lesson learned in a pandemic year? "You have to think differently," Houghton said.

A lot of signage business accompanied the new pandemic messaging for businesses; think about the arrows on floors and social distance reminders that you see in stores. The company also produced many yard signs for graduates, given the massive cancellations that came from the annual spring and summertime rituals.

"We had to pivot our business a bit," Houghton said. "And in a way it had a positive effect on us."

Houghton is no stranger to the pivot. The previous owners had to decide whether to continue with the large old-style printing presses, or transition into digital printing. Having gone with latter, E & S has cleared room for those other buckets making moves with on-demand printing projects. "We've learned that we're very competitive on projects up to about 2,500 pieces," he said.

In addition to bringing business concepts to the light of day, Houghton likes the notion of becoming a one-stop-shop for his clients. E & S is a place where you can get decals for company vehicles, as well as business cards and letterhead. And even the outdoor signage. Without offering that variety, a marketing manager might be running all over town to find each of those things.

At the office on a Friday morning, the bold graphics of their own logo on the wall speaks to what E & S can do for their clients. Inside the warehouse, the works in progress showcase their business range. A bus, currently wrapped up in blue, will soon take on that particular company's logo. Some outdoor signage awaits its painting. And a lady named Kate Sullivan carefully applies graphics to a backlit panel. Though there are no big rigs parked here today, they do some good business putting graphics on tankers and semis.

### Expansions in business and family

In a post-pandemic world, with business ready to boom, Houghton looks to maintain that sustainable growth. Around the same time he purchased three businesses in a half a dozen years, he and his wife started a family. They now have three boys, aged 2, 3, and 4. So a certain status quo may



Kate Sullivan, an employee at E & S Graphics, smoothly applies graphics to a board, as Nick Houghton, the company owner, looks on.

be okay for the time being, even though they're not turning away business.

"I'm a firm believer in the idea of growing the business and once you feel that pain figure out a way to get it done," Houghton said.

There had been a learning curve, of course, with the addition of each new business. "Getting all those systems acclimated and working together takes some time," Houghton said. "In the last year we've

ironed out all those processes and it's become very smooth."

As preschoolers at home make their way toward kindergarten and elementary school, Houghton will likely take those next steps of expansion on the business front. And in the business that often literally puts the writing on the wall, he'll likely move confidently, buoyed by that entrepreneurial spirit and drive to bring things to life.