

## Getting to Know . . .



### Roger Schurman: Neon man

by Kathy Bylsma

Most people are familiar with the big pink neon pig that says "Pig out" in the window of Battle Ground's Fatty Patty's. Roger Schurman is very familiar with it. He made it.

"I'm real proud of that one," Schurman said.

Schurman began his own business, Gas 'n Glass, about three years ago after being laid off in construction. He attended the Neon Art and Tube Bending School in Portland, where

While Schurman is bending the glass he uses a blow hose, used by glass blowers, to help control the shape and fuse the glass tube. Then he welds the shaped glass to a machine.

The machine vacuums out all of the air, zaps impurities with high electrical charges and fills the glass tubes with gas, and Schurman seals the tube with the gas inside.

Schurman recently built two signs for a car wash in Hazel Dell. The signs say:

he learned the basics of neon tube bending after four months. Then he plunged into the craft, opening his one-man, one-shop business as soon as he figured out how to hook up the gas lines.

Schurman says every sign he builds presents new problems, and sometimes he gets pretty frustrated.

"The neighbors have probably heard me screaming until I was hoarse, I don't know how many times," he said.

And as a self-proclaimed perfectionist, Schurman spends a lot of time making sure every sign is just right.

"If you make it bad, throw it away and start over again," he said.

This serves as a personal rule for Schurman, who thinks Lloyd Center's neon looks boring, and has a form of critique for other neon signs.

"There's a lot of bad neon out there. The customer's got a sign that's supposed to last for 15-20 years," he said. "I don't want them coming back and pounding on my door in five years."

The process of building a sign can be tedious. First, Schurman makes a pattern of how the sign will look. Then he transfers it upside down to special artificial asbestos paper and maps out letter connections so the face of the sign will be flat. He carefully marks the glass and heats the section of the glass to be bent.

"Polish Wax and Fragrance" in six-inch neon blue capital letters.

Actually, Schurman used argon, not neon, to get the brilliant blue color. Neon produces reds and pinks, while argon gas makes greens, blues and purples, depending on how much mercury is used. He said this project took him about a week and a half and cost \$1,300.

Schurman believes neon signs are making a comeback, along with other fashions inspired in the earlier half of this century.

"I don't think neon is ever going to fall out of popularity," Schurman said.

His trendy work can be seen from the "Merry Christmas" hanging on his folks' door every winter in Woodland and Liberty Theater in Camas to Bridgeport Ales and other micro-breweries in Portland. Another favorite creation is the neon clock in the lobby of Northwest Natural Gas.

Neon is fun and brightly-colored, but there are some dangers in designing signs, including working with mercury.

"You burn yourself a lot and you cut yourself a lot. The two hazards of the trade," Schurman said.

But that's not enough to make him think about trading his job.

"Obviously, I love it. I'm doing it, even though it gets real frustrating at times."