

*DENNIS DUNN:
PLANT MANAGER,
SAND CREATIONS*

Interview by JADE DELLINGER

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SANFORD, FLORIDA, MAY 21, 1998

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Q: Tell me about the history of Sand Creations. How did you get started manufacturing and distributing cast sand souvenirs?

A: My step-father, Gene Weaver, has spent the last fifteen to twenty years establishing a distribution network of retail clients for novelty items - specialty sunglasses, printed butane lighters, you name it! We were distributing another company's cast sand products, and were having lots of problems getting our orders filled. It seemed like we were the last on their list to get what we needed, and given the relative ease with which these things seemed to be made - we started to look into finding a way to do it ourselves. As we were the ones selling the products,

we knew which items to begin to produce - obviously, the ones that would sell best to our clients. The company that we had been distributing for focused largely on the coarse grained, large scale painted lawn ornaments - frogs and turtles. We realized that our emphasis should be the tourist trade and the smaller "themed" novelty items - dolphins, manatees and sand castles. My father has always been a real stickler for "quality" - we make a better product - and I suppose that is why we've had so much success in a short amount of time. We started Sand Creations just two and a half years ago.

Q: Is it a competitive business - making cast sand products?

A: Yes. Mr. Sandman in Canada was the first company that I'm aware of to make these sorts of products. The company that we had distributed for is still in business and based in Florida. In fact, there are several cast-sand product manufacturers located nearby. And as you've seen in the last year, we have continued to expand our facilities and production - even purchasing a competitor's business, product-line and technique. The painted, cast-sand picture frames are a recent, resulting addition to the Sand Creations product line. Florida is certainly the place to be to capture the tourist dollar, although my Father drives the box vans filled with inventory up and down the East Coast working with accounts and selling products. The actual casting process doesn't really involve big trade secrets - anyone can go to library to learn about mold-making. . .

Q: Artists and artisans have used casting techniques for many centuries. And Florida certainly provides plenty of sunshine and sand - both your raw material and the means to speed your drying time. . .

A: Allan's work definitely necessitates knowing quite a bit about making molds!

Q: I think that's why he's been enthusiastic about working with Sand Creations on the production of 10,000 fulgurite copies. Your



Dennis Dunn packing finished fulgurite reproductions for the trip to USF Contemporary Art Museum

situation and activities are very much like Allan's when making art in his studio - it's "handmade mass-production"! The lightning strike that created the "original" fulgurite was triggered by Allan in Starke; the specimen was prepared in Gainesville; and cast in Sanford for our exhibition premiere in Tampa at the USF Contemporary Art Museum and Museum of Science & Industry. . .

A: It would be hard to argue that the "Petrified Lightning" is not "from Central Florida".

Q: That's also why it was important that the "copies" be cast in the same Zircon sand from which the "original" triggered-strike fulgurite was created. The Zircon sand is a local material, mined by du Pont Corporation at Camp Blanding - where the International Lightning Research Facility is located. Did our insistence on the use of this material force you to alter your production process or normal routine?

A: We are now at the height of our season, so while we are actively producing - Allan's project will force us to shift our usual schedule. My step-father's up in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina where the season starts after Spring Break, but lasts only three months. Orlando has a five to six month season - and we are down from October through February. The off-season allows us time to build inventory and to be creative in evolving the product-line. We talk about new designs, and allow Bill, one of our primary production persons, the time and opportunity to sculpt new forms. I've known Bill for a long time, and my parents have been friends with George (who works with us) for about twenty years. My Mom's office is right beside mine. . . We have several employees that are working with the molds, and now both oil-based and water-based airbrush spray booths. Sand Creations is a family business, and I'd rather keep it small with dedicated people working year-round than to be hiring and firing all the time.

Q: Was this your first "commissioned" project - outside of the normal product-line?

A: We have often been asked if we could do things within our regular line, but this was the first "customized" piece and has been the only "commission" that we've accepted.

Q: I think the timing was right.

A: Well, we all got very interested in Allan's work as an artist and the project he proposed. I have spoken with several friends about it, and they all figure that you can make almost anything as an artist and someone will appreciate it. I do think that the fulgurite copies will be interesting to see all together - 10,000 will really fill a room! When the zircon sand arrived for the project the truck driver unloading the palettes couldn't believe how heavy they were - I think he said that they weigh about two and a half times the weight of our regular volume of sand. We used to talk about one hundred pound bags and fifty pound mixes, but Allan's project has forced us to speak in different terms - an entirely new language is developing at Sand Creations - and those heavy palettes haven't budged an inch since their arrival!

Q: How does this 10,000-piece commission compare with the numbers you produce for product-line items?

A: The production size is actually quite similar. We probably produce 10,000 copies of a given item that we sell in a year. This is our first year in full production, so it's difficult to give specific details, but I would think that we do 10,000 or slightly more units of a popular item annually. The rubber molds are carefully maintained to be used again and again. As for Allan's fulgurite copies, I doubt we will have a need for the molds upon project completion - I'm excited about them, but it would take a lot of explaining to market another run to our souvenir shops. . . Well, unless we airbrush them brown and offer them as cast sand tree branches.

Q: How do you feel about your "product" being exhibited at (and ultimately perhaps purchased by) an art museum?

A: Well, most often we are just concerned about getting the products produced and out the door! I guess I hadn't really thought too much about going to a museum to see them. It is kind of interesting to think about having that many pieces in one place at one time - staying together and continuing to move

around as a whole. It is totally different than how we normally think about what we do. It's exciting to know that our efforts will be valued for years to come. People look at and think about things differently when they see them in a museum. I, for one, am glad Allan asked us to be involved in the project - I'm proud to be a part of it.

THE EVENT

PETRIFIED LIGHTNING FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA

A PROJECT BY ALLAN MCCOLLUM

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