NEWSMAKER

Brian Howard, Kent County luthier

By Jeff Brown
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Magnolia resident Brian Howard is a luthier, a craftsman whose expertise is building stringed instruments, from dulcimers and lutes to ukeleles.

But his raison d'être is the guitar. Acoustic or electric, it doesn't matter. He makes each fretted instrument by hand and also repairs and restores damaged guitars.

Although a Pennsylvanian by birth, as a teen the 53-year-old spent many summers in Kent County and still has family here. His stepbrother, Frank W. "Thumper" Eicherly IV, is captain of the Maggie S. Myers oyster schooner out of Bowers.

It can be said woodworking is engrained in Howard's DNA. His great-grandfather was a master carpenter who worked on chocolate magnate Milton Hershey's iconic hotel, and Howard himself became interested in carpentry at age 15, gaining skills in cabinetry and high-end custom millwork.

But he was influenced by the music of the 1970s' guitar-heavy bands such as Deep Purple and ZZ Top.

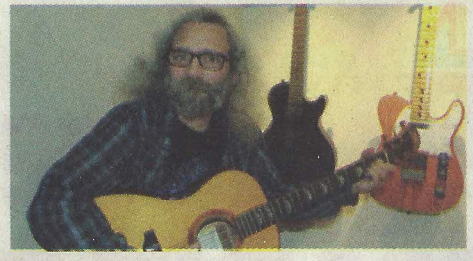
"I've been interested in music since I was about 8 years old," he said. "That's when I started playing. I hung out a lot with my brother, who also played guitar, so we'd play together at home."

Howard's interest in woodcraft and music coalesced about a decade ago into a fulltime vocation.

"I couldn't find an acoustic guitar I liked, so I sat down at my drafting table and designed one," he said. That guitar now hangs on the wall of his small Magnolia workshop, a converted garage off South Main Street.

What's notable about the tiny space is its lack of big machinery. Although equipped with the gear necessary to form the basic parts of each instrument, what's most prominent are the hand tools Howard uses to impart details.

"This is not a hobby, and I'm not retired. This is my life," Howard said. "A lot of people thought I was crazy when I quit my regular job and started doing this. It's a very specialized field."



Brian Howard

Howard maintains he doesn't just build guitars; he handcrafts them for each owner.

"Actually, the guitars are secondary," he said. "I deal with the person on the other side of the guitar. I make the alterations that make the guitar suit the individual."

Why did you decide on Kent County?

The business climate in Pennsylvania, especially for a small business, is very tough. The paperwork is very time consuming. Delaware is a lot friendlier in that regard. At least now keeping track of things like sales tax is a burden I don't have.

What is it about Magnolia that makes your working here special?

We're about two hours from Baltimore and D.C., and less than that from Philly. My research shows that's about how far someone will travel to see a guitar guru. In Harrisburg, I had access to two markets, now I have three. And here I don't have the overhead I used to have. I'm happy to share those savings with my customers.

How has your family reacted?

I don't have much family left in Pennsylvania, and I wanted to spend time with my family here. We decided it would be a great fit all around, family-wise and business-wise. And I'm really surprised at the number of expatriate Pennsylvanians I run into here.

ABOUT HOWARD GUITARS

ADDRESS 7 S. Main St., Magnolia

HOURS Tuesday, 3 to 8 p.m., Wednesday and Thursday, 2 to 6 p.m., Saturday, noon to 4 p.m. Other hours by appointment

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