

Mentor balloon artist creates extraordinary characters

news-herald.com/article/HR/20140413/NEWS/140419837

By [Janet Podolak](#), For The News-Herald

Posted: 04/13/14, 11:27 PM EDT | Updated: on 04/13/2014



Maribeth Joeright/MJoeright@News-Herald.com

William Dodd of Mentor delights in his sword and shield made by balloon artist Robert Huebner who visits Max & Erma's every Tuesday to entertain kids and their families. Also shown is brother Mitchell. The boys were with their parents Heather and Steve and brother Harrison who was celebrating his tenth birthday.

When Robert Huebner runs into old friends such as former classmates of Willoughby South High's Class of '89, they don't quite understand what it is he does for a living.

"I'm a balloon twister," he tells them.

But when they see him in action, they're typically astonished.

His hands and fingers fly through the actions of twisting balloons into shapes that often resemble cartoon characters seen on TV. Using a hand pump, he inflates a succession of long balloons that he stashes in the large pockets of the baggy pants he also made. When it's time

to twist the inflated balloons into the shapes he has in mind, the balloons squeak and seem to almost scream as he twists them into each other, molding eyes, lips, tails and other apertures. But they rarely break.

“Right now the two most popular ones are Hello Kitty and Minions from ‘Despicable Me’,” he said.

His favorite creature to make is a monkey, complete with pink lips, bulging eyes, and ears. It clutches a pair of bright yellow bananas in hand and foot.

More than 800 balloons are tightly packed into the busking bag he carries at his side.

Organized by color, hole side up, they can be protected from heat or cold by rolling up the bag’s sides and securing it with a drawstring.

“Buskers are street performers,” he explained.

“The etymology of the word is ‘seeker.’ ”

In cities such as San Francisco and New Orleans with thriving street scenes, buskers are licensed and compete for the right to perform at key corners where people gather. They usually put out a hat or tin to collect tips.

Huebner, known by most simply as Robert, also makes the lion’s share of his livelihood from tips. He plies his balloon art sculptures on Tuesdays at Max & Erma’s in Mentor plus Fridays and Sundays at El Palenque Mexican Restaurant in Eastlake.

“I also work many of the special events in Willoughby, such as ArtsFest,” he said.

“I’ve been doing it for about six years, so it’s gotten so people look for me.”

Entirely self-taught as a balloon artist, Huebner started practicing as a way to employ his unusually well-developed dexterity — a skill he’s had since he was a boy and one he enjoys fine-tuning.

“At first I trained to be a chef at Loretta Paganini’s place in Chester Township and worked nights as a bartender at TGI Fridays,” he recalled.

“I was always doing tricks so I started flipping bottles as I mixed drinks and soon I realized my tips were increasing.”

He bought the busking bag and supplies of balloons and soon was creating more and more elaborate creatures.

“One thing just led to another, and soon I was being hired for birthday parties and other events,” he said.

His restaurant gigs help him make friends with folks who take his card and later call him to entertain at their events.

Joey Stump, manager at Max & Erma’s, said Huebner comes on Tuesdays when kids eat free.

“I first knew him when we both worked here as staffers before I became a manager. I knew how good he was with balloons, so it was a no-brainer to get him here on Kids Night.”

Stump said Huebner gets to about 50 tables during his three-hour stint on Tuesdays.

“Everyone loves him,” he said.

Huebner said the timing he needs to work the restaurant crowd is as important as the balloon sculptures he makes.

“I really enjoy watching families have fun together, and I try to get to every table,” he said.

“I make the families with little kids my first priority and try to keep track of where they are in their meal so I’m not getting in the way of servers,” he explained. “I try to read the crowd and

discern its dynamics so I can give them what they want.”

Like other performers, he draws energy from the crowd and has learned that eye contact is important.

“And it surprises families that I can look at them and talk to them without looking at my hands as I twist the balloons into shape.”

Huebner, 43, says he’s tired at the end of the night when he’s twisted his way through about 500 balloons.

“It’s pretty physical work and my heart rate goes up,” he said.

But he’s a long-distance cyclist, runs, and lifts weights to stay in shape.

And he spends part of each day at the public library, researching characters he can craft into balloons.

“I’m also trying to develop my skills at doing caricatures into a sideline,” he said. “I’ve bought brush pens and ordered tutorials from the manufacturer and now am practicing that.”

He also wants to revisit his culinary training and learn how to carve designs and faces in melons and other fruits.

“I think it’s important to cultivate your strong points rather than beat yourself up over things you can’t do,” he said.

See Robert Huebner at work from 5 to 8 p.m. Tuesdays at Max & Erma’s, 7890 Mentor Ave., Mentor, and 6 to 9 p.m. Fridays and 4 to 7 p.m. Sundays at El Palenque Mexican Restaurant, 35520 Vine St., Eastlake. Reach him at 216-926-7621.