

## The Woodlands features



Balloon artist Joel Wilkinson, Conroe, makes balloon art and animals for a birthday party in The Woodlands. Wilkinson uses about 100 balloons an hour while making his balloon art at the parties.

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FACES IN THE CROWD

### Conroe man helps brings smiles to kids

Joel Wilkinson twists, turns, shapes figures as balloon artist

By BROOKE HATCHETT

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#### JOEL WILKINSON

- **Age:** 27
- **Occupation:** Balloon artist and risk assessor
- **Community connection:** Lives in Conroe
- **Fast fact:** Can create dozens of balloon figures from Tommy guns to flower bouquets
- **Quick quote:** "It's walking and breathing to me. I don't even think about it"

**D**espite his jovial laugh and bulging bag of balloons, Joel Wilkinson is no clown. He's a "twister."  
"Clowns actually scare me," he said. "No red noses or big feet for me."

The 27-year-old Conroe resident has been in the balloon artist business since he was 16 and saw an advertisement offering lessons in the craft.

"I said, 'Well, that sounds like fun if only for a hobby, if nothing else,' " he said.

He paid the balloon artist \$50 to learn 30 or 40 balloon figures. Now, the figures he creates range from the oft-requested giraffes and teddy bears to Tommy guns and flower bouquets. As a standard response to being asked what he can make, Wilkinson rattles off about 20 samples of his repertoire faster than he can work up an inflatable poodle.

"Teddy bears, kitty cats, puppy dogs, bunny rabbits, mice, turtles, ladybugs, horses, elephants, frogs, monkeys, motorcycles, helicopters, swords, Tommy guns, airplanes, tanks, spiders and rattlesnakes that really rattle," he said. "And that's the short list."

Starting in high school, Wilkinson continued to twist on the side while earning his degree in agronomy, or plant and soil science, at Texas A&M University. At first, he wanted to work in research involving growing plants without soil after interning with NASA. But he enjoyed working for himself and decided to start a home-based risk-assessment business and keep twisting.

"I just love it. I love being able to make money and make kids smile," he said.

Wilkinson said business isn't hard to find in the field. He estimated there are about 20 fellow twisters in The Woodlands and Conroe and none of those he knows struggle to find gigs.

"We all have more business coming our way than we know what to do with," he said.

## **Busy business**

Wilkinson works about five events a week, from children's birthday parties to events like the recent Woodlands Waterway Art Festival. His first gig was at a TGI Friday's in north Houston and he has continued to make area restaurants his regular twisting grounds.

"When the weekend comes around, I can't sit and watch TV. If I'm not in a restaurant, I don't know what to do," he said.

After 11 years of twisting and going through about 800,000 balloons, the skill comes almost as second nature to him, he said. "It's walking and breathing to me. I don't even think about it," he said.

Unlike some balloon artists, Wilkinson opts for ties that feature cartoon characters and Hawaiian shirts while on the job rather than a clown costume. He also has standards for what constitutes good and bad twisters. Bad twisters include those who are slow, push for tips, act unprofessionally or make bad jokes.

Topping the list of qualities that make a good twister is speed. Wilkinson can wrap up an inflatable flower in 45 seconds and the typical dog in about 12. One of the most popular requests, motorcycles, are one of his more impressive timed routines.

"I do a motorcycle behind my back in 38 seconds," he said while demonstrating.

One of his more complex creations was done for 6-year-old Landon Frank, of The Woodlands Sterling Ridge neighborhood. His mother, Jacqueline, met Wilkinson while she was dining with Landon and her two sets of twins at a local restaurant. Frank said she was impressed Wilkinson could keep her five children entertained long enough for her to finish a meal.

She then hired him to work at Landon's upcoming birthday party. Wilkinson was told Landon was a huge fan of Transformers toys, especially the protagonist of the group, Optimus Prime. Wilkinson found a picture of the character online and in about an hour and a half, created a five-and-a-half-foot Optimus Prime.

"You should have seen the smile on his face when he brought that thing through the door," Frank said.

## **Breaking barriers**

Wilkinson's twisting has taken him to more than just birthday parties and festivals. For two years he used the skill while serving as a missionary in Guatemala for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"Kids had never seen it before, so you got to go in a lot of people's homes," he said.

Wilkinson knew twisting would help him break cultural boundaries, so he brought along some balloons and kept a steady supply coming from home thanks to his mother.

"Mom would send me Dr Pepper and beef jerky, you know, stuff they didn't have down there. So she would pack everything in balloons instead of wrapping paper," he said.

He also uses balloon art to cheer nursing home clients and help out at fundraisers.

"I don't do it because I have to or anything. I do it because I love it," he said.

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