

## Stilt Walker Entertains At County Fairs, Parades

Bill Coleman found a fun way to make money in his spare time. He walks on stilts at small town festivals and county fairs where he's known as "Stretch The Nine Foot Clown".

The Denver, Colorado, entrepreneur bought a pair of \$800 handcrafted stilts 10 years ago after reading an article about them. He knew how to use them from a previous job taping drywall. He purchased a \$1,000 Uncle Sam costume and joined the Colorado Clown Association.

Since then, Coleman has added dozens of toys, costumes and gigs to an act that he takes on the road in a 1,000-mile radius from Denver. His fees vary, but his local stilt walking hourly fee starts at \$150/hour with a \$200 minimum.

"I started this when I was in my 40's," Coleman says. "I looked around and tried to create a niche with one-of-a-kind performances and attractions."

Coleman doesn't just do stilts. He also performs as a 10-ft. dancing Christmas tree and he has 18-ft. friendly giant parade puppets. He has also revised and updated popular Emmett Kelly Clown routines, and he fascinates babies to adults with his 14-ft.

solar powered bubble tower, which comes in cow, patriotic, rainbow and other motifs.

"At events, the 2 to 4-year olds get too wound up and start running into each other. So we put the bubble machine on a cycle to adjust the time, so they can kind of collect their senses," Coleman says. "It's not just the kids that get wound up, but the parents as well."

Coleman prefers outdoor street entertainment to indoor stage performances. He offers complete package entertainment that can be customized for specific events - whether it's advertising a business on 5-ft. long pants he wears over his stilts or wrapping the bubble tower in pink for a Komen Race for the Cure for Breast Cancer fundraiser.

He also brings up to 36 pairs of stilts to events for people to try.

"The stilts range from 9 to 24 inches off the ground," Coleman explains

To set himself apart from other U.S. entertainers, Coleman gleaned ideas from traveling to New Zealand, Australia, Ireland and other countries.

When he first started, Coleman "crashed" events for free to become better known and to learn how to entertain. It's also helpful to join associations for clowns,



Bill Coleman takes his entertainment act on the road, walking on stilts at small town festivals and county fairs where he's known as "Stretch The Nine Foot Clown". Photo on right shows his 18-ft. "parade puppet".

stilt walkers and entertainers.

Coleman continually adds costumes, toys and equipment to keep the act fresh. He often wakes up in the middle of the night with ideas for new gags. He markets his business through two websites and by sending 4,000 postcards four times a year to art festivals,

event associations, corporations and chambers of commerce.

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## Michigan Couple Sells Zinnia Seed Online

Gipson (Gipper) and Sharon Baller of Stockbridge, Mich., combine gardening and computer skills to run a business on their 15-acre homestead. They plant about five acres into zinnias and other flower varieties, which they harvest for seed and sell on a website.

Layoffs in railroad, steel and automotive jobs convinced the couple they needed to adapt and create their own business. When Sharon read an article about a nearby zinnia grower who planned to move, Sharon contacted her and arranged to work with her every Friday one growing season. The Ballers later bought the customer list and a couple of pieces of basic equipment.

Gipper applies Roundup weed killer to kill the grass in 100-ft. long, 4-ft. wide strips where he grows zinnias. Seeds are planted Memorial Day and the couple keeps the plants weed-free through July 4 to produce quality flowers. They also weed out spindly and poor plants in order to propagate only the best seed.

When the petals turn pale and dry at the edges, Sharon harvests the flower heads by hand. The heads are dried on screens in the loft of their pole barn, then tumbled and broken apart in an old clothes dryer without heat. Finally, they're run through a seed cleaner which separates seeds from cones and chaff. The seed is labeled by variety and harvest date and stored in tins until Sharon has time to fill packages that she custom designed. A wine chest with rows of deep shelves provides the perfect place to store the packaged seeds.

The price of \$1.50 for 100 Supreme Variety seeds remains the same as when the Ballers bought the business. Other varieties - Benary Giant, Mini Zinnias, Fairy's Whirligig, African Woody and Green Envy - start at \$2.50/pack. Sharon includes seed in every package from blooms picked late in the season to ensure cold hardiness. Cus-



The Ballers plant about five acres into zinnias and other flower varieties, which they harvest for seed and sell on a website.

tomers from all over the world - including China - order zinnias and a wide variety of other seeds from the Ballers.

Sharon, who works as a small business specialist in accounting and computer applications, created a multi-paged website with information on growing flowers and saving seed, advice and quotations on how to live life to the fullest, a diary of life on Redbud Farms, and a downloadable seed catalog.

With the success of her online business, Sharon recently created an Internet small business mall (www.lobatek.com) for other home-based entrepreneurs. She creates a free webpage and charges \$1/month for "web booth space." Sharon earns a commission from PayPal for sales made by those businesses. She also charges an extra fee for regularly updating search engines to bring more Internet traffic to the page, and for a monthly newsletter that shares e-commerce advice.

With hard work, the Ballers have set up successful sideline businesses that will help them in their retirement, Sharon says. Plus, there's a bonus. Working with flowers relaxes her. "They provide peace of mind to me."

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## Ohio Fish Farm Raises Shrimp, Stocks Farm Ponds

With \$8 billion worth of seafood imported into the U.S. every year, many rural landowners are finding ways to cash in on the boom in aquaculture.

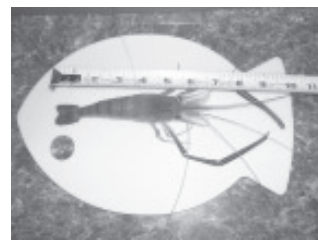
A 1-acre pond can raise up to 2,000 lbs. of freshwater shrimp which can be harvested and sold fresh to buyers in one day, says Bob Calala, whose family has been involved in the industry for 44 years. The Calalas run a diverse nursery selling juvenile shrimp and small-mouth bass fingerlings, and raising freshwater shrimp, soft-shell crayfish, fathead minnows and food and game fish. The family business has 60 ponds on 90 acres of water, plus tanks made out of grain bin rings for shrimp nurseries.

Calala notes that in Ohio there are already 200 licensed aquaculture operations.

"The largest expense is digging the ponds," he explains. It recommends rectangular ponds 6 to 8 ft. deep that can be drained, which makes them usable for raising fish or shrimp.

Shrimp bring the quickest return. In 100 days (with water temperatures that start at 70 degrees and stay above 60 degrees) they're ready to sell. Consumers want fresh, safe shrimp, Calala says, and selling them is the easy part. An article in the local paper and a couple of simple ads, resulted in cars lined up an hour before his sale started in 2006. He and his workers netted out 800 lbs. of shrimp, rinsed them off and sold them within three hours. Half the customers went home empty-handed. The following year, they sold 1,500 lbs. Customers bring their own ice and containers and pay \$8/lb.

"If you want a second crop, you can stock rainbow trout," Calala says. "Put 8 to 10-in. trout in the pond in the fall, raise them until the ice is out, feed them and harvest them at 12 to 15 inches in April by having people come and fish them out of the pond for a couple of weekends." Because it's a form of



The Calala family has been involved in aquaculture for 44 years. Shrimp bring the quickest return, they say.

entertainment, you can make more money than just selling them for stocking.

In the past, there has also been a good market for bait soft-shell crayfish, which sell for about \$5/doz. in Ohio.

The Calalas' other market is selling game fish for stocking. That market takes a couple of years to establish, Calala says. It's also a limited market since once a pond is stocked, the fish reproduce, and the buyer doesn't need to buy more fish.

For the Calalas, diversification has helped them survive fluctuating markets and changing regulations. As president of the Ohio Aquaculture Association and a member of agriculture and natural resources boards, Calala is willing to share information with people interested in aquaculture. His business also sells juvenile shrimp (8 cents/apiece) to shrimp growers.

Though there are challenges with increased fuel and feed costs, the market is good, Calala says. "Consumers want fresh, locally grown food that they know is safe and naturally grown. If you build a pond, you can raise anything in it," Calala says.

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