

GREATER FORT WAYNE Business Weekly

Rock on

Home-improvement project leads to faux-stone product

(Created: Friday, March 9, 2007 7:26 AM EST)

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Three years ago, marine designer Chris Jones decided he wanted to use stacked stone to dress up his 1950s Fort Wayne ranch house in a style reminiscent of the great Frank Lloyd Wright.

He wasn't satisfied with the natural materials that were available, so the research-and-development specialist came up with a way to make cast, faux stone from granular sheet-molded compound discarded by the auto industry. At the urging of an entrepreneurial neighbor, he decided to turn his patent-pending process into a business, which he named Abby Rock, after his daughter.

Jones continued to work at Fort Wayne boat manufacturer Harris-Kayot and spent his evenings and weekends perfecting his products, creating a business plan and eventually rehabbing a rundown old storage building a few blocks west of downtown for manufacturing purposes.

"People thought I was nuts because (the building) was so neglected, for want of a better word," Jones said. Along the way, Jones also formed a partnership with Summit Group Holdings, a local investment group with the business, financial and legal expertise he needed to turn his plans into reality. The home-improvement project that inspired the whole thing, however, still is undone.

"At first it was a selfish effort, but I still don't have stone at home," he said. Sheet-molded compound, which is used to produce everything from boat hulls to bathtubs, is used by automakers and parts suppliers to make body panels, hoods and bumpers, among other items. As the pieces are shaved to remove rough edges, grains of sheet-molded compound are shorn away. The leftover material is then collected and, more often than not, discarded in a landfill, Jones said.

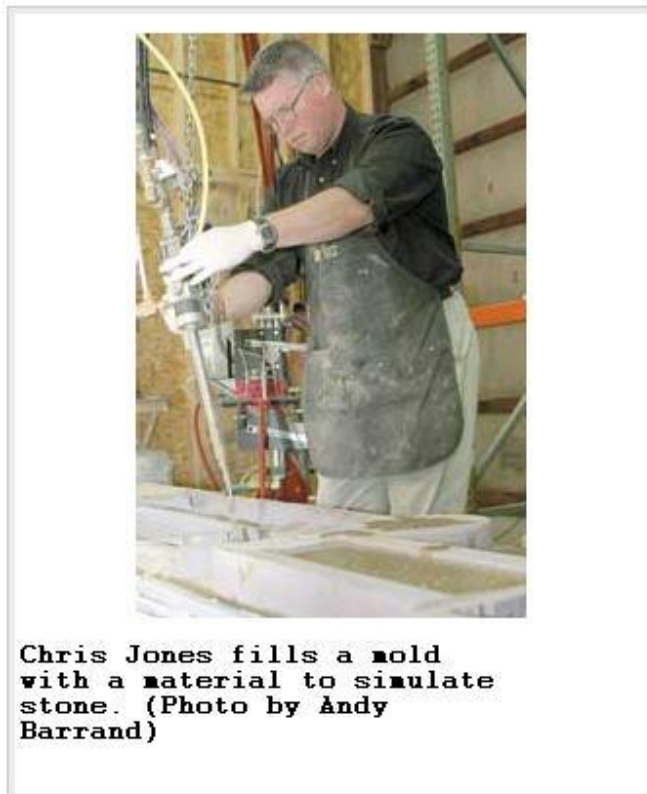
Instead, Jones takes the powdery leftovers, mixes them with pigment and about 30 percent real stone filler and pours it all into molds that simulate a panel of stacked stone. The pseudo-stone panels then are "roughed up a bit" to give them the feel and texture of real stone. The irregular edges of the panels actually are shaped to fit into one another.



Chris Jones, founder of Abby Stone, stands next to his faux-stone waterfall/planter.

"It's not exactly Lego-style, but it's close," Jones said. An 11 1/2-square-foot panel weighs about 50 pounds, probably a fourth of the weight of real stone, Jones said, and can be produced for less cost. "I look at best cost. That doesn't necessarily mean lowest cost," he said. There's no waste, because leftover pieces of the pseudo-stone can be recycled to make new panels. Jones has identified 25 potential uses for the Abby Rock stone, but he's concentrating on just a few to begin with.

He displayed a "stone" waterfall/planter, which could be used to accent a garden or swimming pool, at a Virginia Beach, Va., garden show in February. The product made its local debut at the Fort Wayne Home and Garden Show in early March. He is developing distribution contacts and plans to work through professional swimming-pool installers to market the water features to their clients.



"We've aligned ourselves with the right people to move the product," Jones said. The panels also can be used as exterior accents on homes and commercial buildings, just as real stone and brick are used now. Rather than sell directly to customers, he plans to market the panels through home and commercial builders.

Because there are homes near his Osage Street manufacturing facility, Jones said he made an effort to let neighbors know what his plans were for the building. He also had to meet standards to obtain an air permit for the facility, which was issued a few weeks ago.

Jones' career in research and development and boat design grew out of an early interest in art. An Elkhart resident who spent a lot of time on the river, he bought two scrap boats when he was in high school, took them apart and figured out what had failed and how to fix it.

Jones picked up training and experience in and out of tech school and by working on his own projects. One day, the general manager of Chris-Craft, the legendary Elkhart boat builder, happened to drive by and see him working with a boat on the front lawn. He stopped to chat, found out Jones was a draftsman and a few months later offered him a job.

Jones went on to work with other boat builders, including Lake Forest, Ill.-based Brunswick. He moved to Fort Wayne to work for Harris-Kayot, which was sold and then quickly sold again, ending up as part of Brunswick.

Jones has been working full time at Abby Rock since Sept. 1 and currently is the company's only full-time employee. Part-time and temp workers — in some cases, family members — are brought in as needed to fill orders.

For information on Abby Rock products, visit www.abbyrock.com.