

Designers turn Tahoe into lasting impression



Marley Reel and Mike Miller with their screen printer.
Photos/Terra Breedan

By Terra Breedan

MEYERS — A spider-like machine sits in the middle of the garage with its arms jutting into the small space.

“Careful that thing is hot,” says Marley Reel, co-owner of Rise Designs.

The sizzling screen printer dominates the room. Reel squeezes past the machine and tries to avoid tripping over the pair of boisterous dogs bounding about his feet.

“Yep. This is where the magic happens,” Reel’s partner, Mike

Miller, says proudly.

This is the office-store-studio of Rise Designs.



Rise Designs' creations are inspired by nature.

Located in Meyers, Rise Designs is a graphic design and clothing company that was founded by Miller and Reel in 2007. Specializing in hats, T-shirts, and sweat shirts as well as logo and event poster designs, Rise has become increasingly successful in Lake Tahoe as its bold prints and strong design work has gained recognition around the lake.

"All of these designs are hand painted," Miller said as he gestured at the canvases and trucker hats stacked around the garage.

Dripping with bright colors, paintings of mountains, rivers, snowboarders and mountain bikers line the walls. The vibrant artwork depicts scenes from Lake Tahoe. All of the outdoor activities and natural beauty of Lake Tahoe is portrayed on the paintings.

"Our stuff stems from nature, that's our thing," Reel said. "We are Tahoe guys and we like nature, it's all about being outside and enjoying the outdoors."

Almost all of the designs are motivated by the landscape of Lake Tahoe.

“We get out. We hike, we bike, we snowboard, and that brings us to the outdoors which is where we get our inspiration for our artwork,” Miller said.

Before founding Rise Designs, Reel was a graphic design student from Vermont and Miller hailed from Southern California, graduating from Arizona State University with a degree in industrial design. The two met at Sierra-at-Tahoe where they worked in the season pass office.

“Meeting up with Marley was key for us to develop our business and sustain ourselves in town,” Miller said. “We couldn’t really work at a resort for the rest of our lives, but we love it here.”

Reel said, “So, I approached Mike and was like, hey we should do some artwork together.”

The rest was proverbial history as the two founded the company Rise Designs. They started the business with a couple of sweat shirts printed with their designs by a local screen printing company. Right afterward, the company that printed the shirts went out of business and put their screen printer up for sale.



A water color by Mike Miller.

“Marley and I were like, hey this is an opportunity – we are going to buy this screen printing setup,” Miller said.

It wasn't an easy task starting a business from scratch. Neither Miller nor Reel had ever run a business before and they had to learn how to do everything one step at a time.

"There is no off-button," Reel said. "You are always working on it and thinking about it. It's just the two of us. If we aren't doing it, nothing is happening. We have to keep moving forward."

But all of the hard work is paying off. Since 2007, Rise Designs has become a successful clothing company that specializes in outdoor adventure clothing and graphic design.

Rise Designs clothing is carried in many stores throughout Lake Tahoe including Gaialicious, Sports LTD, Tahoe Rock and Ride, and the visitors centers in Incline Village and Tahoe City. They also do graphic design work for local companies. They have designed beer labels for Cold Water Brewery, hats for the Humane Society, and worked with the League to Save Lake Tahoe.

"When we first started we used to extend our arms to businesses for projects," Reel said. "But these days, companies call us because they know our design work."

Although Rise Designs now has hundreds of clients and participates in events all around the lake, the two still maintain their creative roots.

"We are both artists," Miller said. "I have been asked 'what do you want to do with your life' and I want to be drawing, I want to sustain my lifestyle, and I want to be a Tahoe resident. I want to live the life that I choose."

The next step toward fulfilling that goal is for Rise Designs is to move to a bigger workspace, the garage is too crowded for their growing business. Reel and Miller want to keep the company based in Meyers.

“Meyers is a big part of what we do and where we came from,” Reel said. “It’s a great community here.”

Reel and Miller also have tons of ideas for new Rise Designs products.

“We really love doing hats,” Miller said. “There are so many different designs we can do and they are so much fun.”

But they don’t want to confine themselves to one type of clothing.

“Our goal is to put our designs on all types of products,” Miller said. “And who knows what that might be in the future, it might even be watches or socks.”

The only thing certain is that Reel and Miller have a strong partnership and a love for their art; it’s what has been the driving force behind Rise Designs since the beginning.

“You have to have passion in what you do,” Reel said. “If you do it because you love it, not for money or other reasons, your passion will take you there.”