



PETER BATES, whose business The SignMan has been given the contract to create a new look for the Princess Margaret Hospital. He is pictured with a portrait of co-founder Cynthia Bates.

Photo: **Shawn Hanna/Tribune Staff**

The signs of success for local business

A MAJOR contract to design, fabricate and install a new visual identity and signage plan for the Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) has been awarded to a leading Bahamian company.

The contract followed the opening last year of the \$100m redevelopment of PMH's Shirley Street compound. This was a major upgrade of the 402-bed hospital, which houses more than 70 medical and surgical specialities.

As the country's main healthcare facility, the hospital has occupied the site in one form or another for over a century. It was redeveloped and expanded several times, and is now relatively congested - meaning access and safety concerns are more important.

"Navigating such a complex environment can be daunting for visitors, patients and staff," said Peter Bates, general manager of The SignMan. "User-friendly signage helps people get from one point to another with minimal aggravation. We are well equipped to deal with identification and wayfinding issues in terms of information processing, graphic design, materials selection and installation capabilities.

"Our team has worked tirelessly to ensure the effectiveness of every PMH sign, and we have finished production on items ranging from campus directories and office IDs to traffic identification and directional monuments, to way-finding notices and decals."

Mr Bates said the Public Hospitals Authority should be congratulated for shopping at home and benefiting from competitive pricing on a huge job that meets world-class standards.

Operating from a 5,500 square foot building on Shirley Street opposite Collins House, The Sign-

Man's 26 designers, project managers, fabricators and installers - up from four when Mr Bates opened the shop in 1990 - provide full-service, creative fabrication and installation services. The SignMan produces wall, window and vehicle wraps, large format digital printing on almost any media, TV-based video signage, large-scale three-dimensional signage, and a range of specialty advertising products. A bucket truck is on hand for complex installations.

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In the late 1980s, Mr Bates faced an uncertain future. His wife, Kate, had recently helped co-found an advertising agency that was only just beginning to find its feet.

"I managed Maura's Wholesale, selling everything from Eveready batteries to 3M tape," Mr Bates recalled. "But there was something missing and I started looking around for something else to do. At the time, American sign companies were beginning to offer franchises, so we headed off to a trade show in California."

On the return flight to Nassau, Mr Bates was thumbing through the exhibition magazine when he noticed a small advertisement selling a business opportunity rather than a franchise. Using the plane's seatback phone, he set up an appointment - and a week later he and his wife were on their way back to California.

"They were software developers and equipment re-sellers called Sign Biz who had written computer

applications for the trade, and we were their fifth sale," Mr Bates said. "Our investment included inventory, equipment, software and training, but it was not a franchise so there were no royalty fees. We rented a small space on Mackey Street (where Fine Threads is today) and in our first year we were able to bill more than we spent. And with no franchise fees to pay we were able to compete in price with both foreign and local competitors."

Sign Biz has since grown into a respected trade network of 200 digital sign companies across 43 US states and six countries. Mr Bates is a prominent member of the network's advisory board.

According to Teresa Young, who opened one of the first vinyl sign shops in the US and who is now president of Sign Biz: "Today, The SignMan is one of the most successful operations in our entire network. In fact, The SignMan is in the top two per cent of all sign shops in the US, based on revenue."

She said Mr Bates had demonstrated "keen leadership" by opening up new paths for ownership in his business, growing the operation in every way possible, and giving his employees "a chance to be part of something bigger."

According to Mr Bates, "my degree from Waterloo University was in mathematics and computer science, and I started out as a systems analyst. It's known as information technology today, and this background enabled me to keep abreast



SIGNMAN workers installing new signage at the Princess Margaret Hospital.

of technology developments in our field."

The SignMan can design and produce the highest quality interior and exterior signs for hospitals, hotels, businesses, government agencies, roadways, restaurants, law firms, hair salons, apartments, and more - all to world-class standards. "We are a Bahamian company that's high-tech with a 'yes we can' attitude. Some of our employees are now shareholders," Mr Bates said.

In effect, The SignMan has sold ownership to people who might otherwise not be able to become entrepreneurs on their own. "With our employees having their own skin in the game," Mr Bates said, "customers become very special."

At 68, Mr Bates is still energetic - as evidenced by his diverse community service work. He is a former member of the Urban Renewal Foundation board and currently serves on the council of the Bureau of Standards and Quality. An active

Rotarian and Chamber of Commerce member, he is also a long-time community organiser for St Andrew's Presbyterian Kirk.

But he admits he is searching for ways to scale back, while maintaining and growing his 26-year business legacy. So far four employees - from senior manager to production leader - have bought 10 per cent of the SignMan's shares. And Mr Bates is seeking to sell all or a majority of his remaining stake.

"By enabling employees to share in ownership we have done something rare in the Bahamas, and this has created added value for our customers. We now have owners talking directly to customers. It is a strong indication of our permanency and the company's inherent strength," he said.

Although he is prepared to stay on in a leadership role for several years to manage a transition, Mr Bates said he would also be willing to accept a graceful exit by working with a "get

involved" entrepreneur who wants to parachute into a proven business model and grow it.

Mr Bates said the company has shown "consistent growth over the past quarter century and is well-prepared to compete internationally." And close links to top US sign makers position the company to undertake large-volume production when necessary.

The company's most prestigious upcoming job is for the University of the Bahamas. This architectural wayfinding system involves some 470 individual signs ranging from the main entrance monument to the founding plaque, as well as custom flags, backdrops, campus building signs and letters, internal and external directories. All to international standards.

"I do love this business, and there is no doubt that The SignMan is successful and well-positioned for the future," Mr Bates said. "But eventually change has to come."