

By Patricia Kaowthumrong

# Carrying On

How a mobile graphics installer is honoring the memory of her beloved husband & blazing a trail for other female installers.

When Christa Harden began installing vinyl signage and vehicle wraps, she was working as a graphic designer at Battle Ground Printing in Vancouver, Washington. While employee turnover nudged her to become involved in the print shop's production and installation processes, the skills Harden acquired would eventually lead her down a path she never anticipated.

## LOVE AT FIRST SIGN

At Battle Ground Printing, she met and fell in love with Mikalae "Mik" Harden, who started the business with his father at age 19 and helped grow the modest print shop into a one-stop marketing business. The couple married in 2011 and hoped to focus their abilities on one service by establishing their own independent vinyl-graphics installation business in 2015: MXC Media (the "M" and "C" in the name represent the first letters of their names).

"We both liked the idea of install-only to just focus on one niche you could really do your best at rather than trying to be the best at everything, which is very difficult to do," says Christa Harden about her and Mik's decision to branch off from the hectic print shop.

Mik Harden, armed with Professional Decal Application Alliance (PDAA) Master's Certified Installer and 3M Preferred Installer designa-

tions, worked as MXC Media's lead installer and Christa worked as an installer and project manager. The duo provided mobile services in Oregon and Washington.

## CONTINUING A LEGACY

On July 31, 2018, Mik passed away after a tragic motorcycle accident, leaving the growing business without the vital certifications to continue the services the

Christa Harden has worked to earn graphics installation certifications in order to carry on the work of MXC Media after her husband and business partner Mik died in a motorcycle accident last year.



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Christa says her art background and eye for detail have come in handy as she perfects the skills needed to install even the toughest wraps and graphics.



Mik & Christa Harden established their own independent vinyl graphics installation business in 2015: MXC Media. The "M" and "C" in the name represent the first letters of their names.

Hardens took so much pride in providing. Determined to continue Mik's dedicated work, Christa set out to earn the qualifications necessary to keep MXC Media going strong.

"When Mik passed away, all those certifications went with him," Harden says. "So, I figured if I was going to keep doing this, I needed to have them to save the business."

As a result, she earned 3M Preferred Installer and Avery Dennison Certified Wrap Installer designations in September and October 2018 and her PDAA certification this January.

"I just want people to know that Mik was the heart and soul of the business," Harden says. "He was the one that taught me everything I know."

## GOING SOLO

When the Hardens first started the business ([mxcmmedia.com](http://mxcmmedia.com)), Harden says she hadn't done a lot of installs to that point—just some basic flat windows and simple decals on cars. She gained most of her skills by working on projects at MXC Media with Mik, who was always very encouraging.

"There are definitely times being a woman in this industry makes you feel like an outsider, and I've only come across a few

other installers who are women," Harden says. "So, it was always nice to have him rooting for me. He never second-guessed my abilities. He was a good sport and a really supportive partner."

By continuing the mobile-installation business, Harden also hoped to maintain the quality and type of work Mik wanted to present. Installing vehicle wraps and graphics for brand-name retailers makes up the majority of her work, but the number of jobs from each category varies with the seasons.

For example, a lot of fleets finalize their budgets in January, which is when the companies decide to invest in new graphics for vehicles (though the cold and snowy season often isn't the best time for installs, Harden says).

MXC Media has installed wraps for a few



The duo provided mobile services in Oregon and Washington until Mik's death last July.



A favorite project of MXC Media is a 1987 Toyota Corolla FX16 GTS for close friend Jeff Dietz, who runs sweeps for a local race car rally. MXC helped Dietz apply a design to his car that is a tribute to the original racing livery, featuring a black background with white paneling and stripes that are red, orange and yellow.



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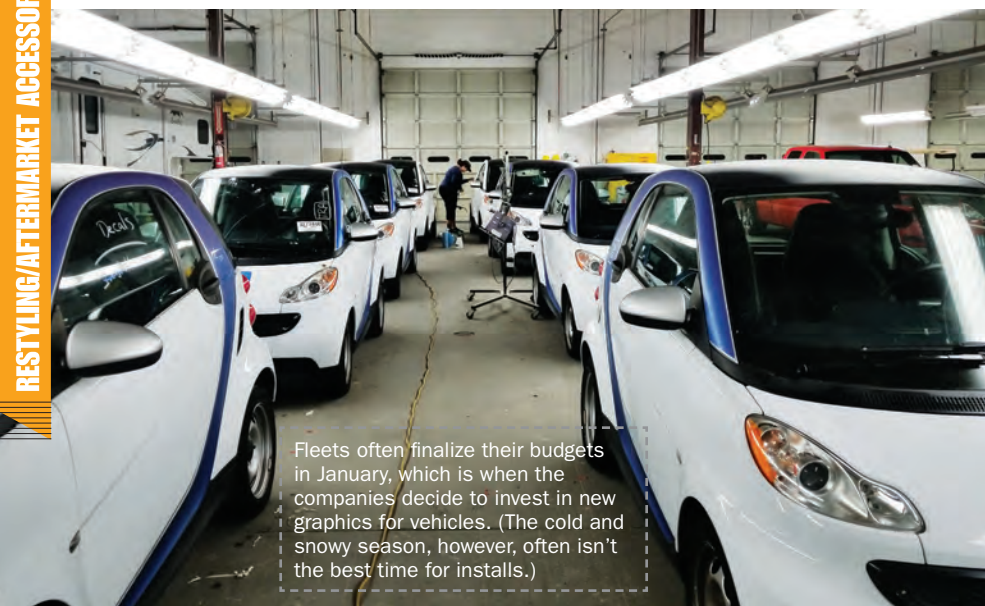
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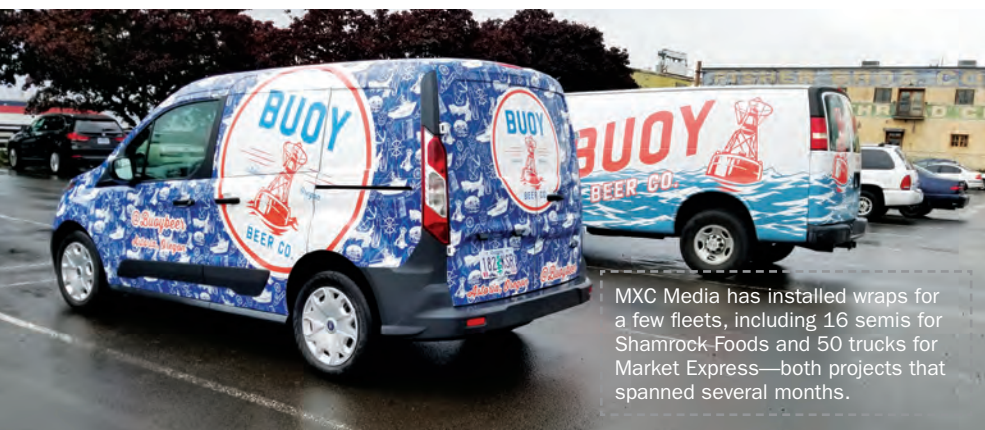
# Carrying On



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MXC Media has installed wraps for a few fleets, including 16 semis for Shamrock Foods and 50 trucks for Market Express—both projects that spanned several months.



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Christa credits Mik for the company's success. "I can't take credit for everything that's happened over the years—it wouldn't have happened without him."

fleets, including 16 semis for Shamrock Foods and 50 trucks for Market Express—both projects that spanned several months. She generally completes jobs on her own but has other installers she can subcontract, if needed.

A lot of Harden's work also comes from 3M and PDAA referrals, another perk to becoming a certified installer.

## CREATIVE ADVANTAGE

Since clients typically send Harden completed graphics to install, she doesn't do as much design work as she used to. Still, her background in the arts has been helpful.

She loves painting, drawing and photography, but never imagined herself in the vinyl installation industry.

"I started out in college in photography and photo editing and eventually made my way to graphic design, so I really didn't think I'd be the type to do the hands-on labor," Harden says. "But it does actually play well with my background in arts and creating, because I can look at things a little differently."

For example, Harden's sensitive design eye can easily nail down a vehicle's balance and she can typically tell whether something is level or not without using tools. And, because a lot of creative mediums require fine motor skills, she says abilities like having a steady hand and being able to draw a straight line have come in handy.

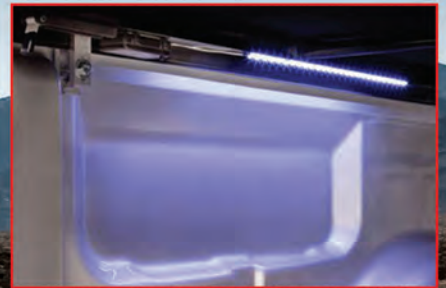
While wall murals make for an easy day of work, some of Harden's most rewarding and challenging projects involve color-changing vehicle wraps. She enjoys working with customers to get a feel for the type of style they want, whether they're interested in highlighting or minimizing certain fea-





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## Carrying On

tures on the car or adding accents or color blocking to make it stand out.

### COLOR-CHANGING MAGIC

"You definitely get to use your knowledge of the materials and how to mix different finishes and colors to make the car really stand out," Harden says. "It's not something I get to do as often as I would like, but I feel like customers are always really excited. As soon as they see the change in their car, they're like a little kid at Christmas."

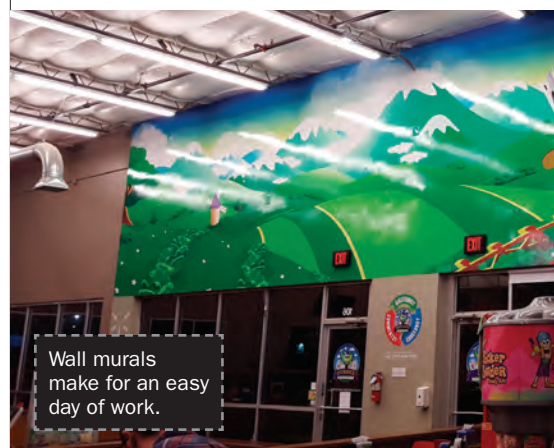
Since she doesn't encounter a lot of end-user clients during her commercial work, Harden appreciates the customer interaction that comes with retail vehicle wrap projects.

One of her favorite projects is a 1987 Toyota Corolla FX16 GTS for close friend Jeff Dietz, who volunteers as a sweep driver for the American Rally Association. MXC helped Dietz apply a design to his car used for the green light course closing at the 2018 Olympus Rally. The design was a tribute to the original racing livery, featuring a black background with white paneling and stripes that were red, orange and yellow.

"Trying to get it to fit the car exactly right with cut graphics would have been difficult, so we had to use knife-less ones to lay out all the stripes," she says. "It got very, very detailed down to the last fraction of an inch because we had to have these perfectly parallel stripes that were slightly getting larger as they went inward, so it had to be laid out by hand."

### LOOKING AHEAD

Harden likes the flexibility and variety of work she does at MXC, but weathering the inconsistency of projects can be tough. In the future, she hopes to do more work that's independent from referrals and sign



Wall murals make for an easy day of work.





Christa says Mik was a constant source of support as she learned the ropes in a business where female installers are in the minority.

shops, such as vehicle restyling and color-changing wraps—things she can easily do on her own.

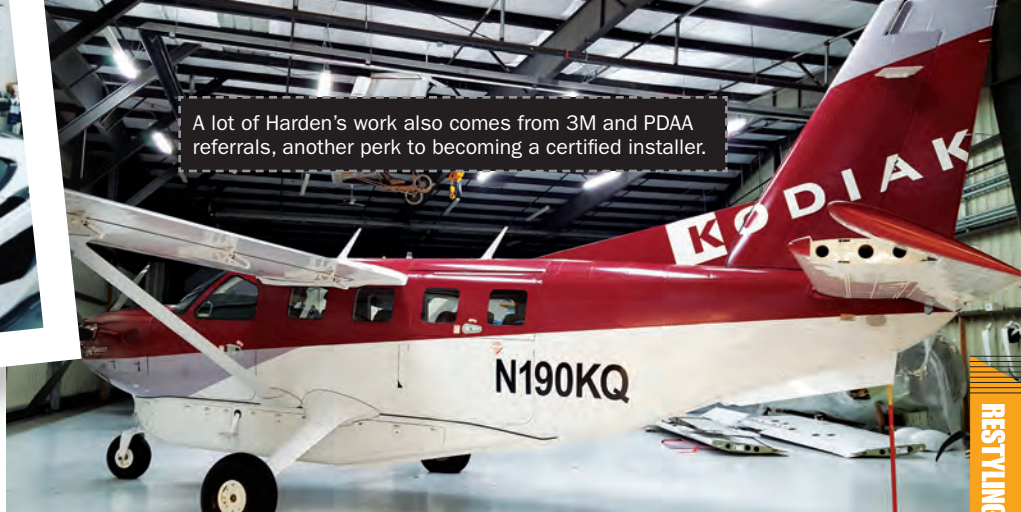
She encourages those who are interested in getting into the vinyl-install business to get a good education and gain experience at a print shop, where you can see how things are produced and how to set things up for proper install.

“I think it’s always good to start out in production and to get an idea of how these materials all come together and what their uses are,” Harden says. “If you just jump straight into an install and you don’t know anything about the vinyl or the other materials you’re sent, things can go badly very quickly.”

Harden is excited to continue working in the vinyl industry, a growing niche in the automotive aftermarket, and networking is also on her agenda, including attending her first SEMA Show.

But what she’s happiest about is the ability to continue her husband’s work.

“I really want to bring some attention to Mik,” she says. “He was really proud of his work. He was a good man. We had a really good partnership, and I can’t take credit for everything that’s happened over the years—it wouldn’t have happened without him.” **TS**



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