



City Neon fabricated and engineered the scaled-model of the Monongahela River designed by Mills Group and WallacePancher Group for the Morgantown Courthouse Plaza.

MADE IN WV

Keeping the Lights On

At 60 years strong, a Morgantown mainstay is still innovating.

CHRISTOPHER ATKINS' COMPUTER wallpaper is a page from a 1956 phone book. He reads one of the short blurbs aloud: "Bell's Invention Practical: A 91-year-old Kentuckian recently doubted whether a voice could be carried over a wire. A demonstration convinced him that the telephone really works." He laughs out loud as he shares it. But the reason Atkins saved this page is the advertisement that appears just above the story. The ad is one of the earliest remaining artifacts of Atkins' family business, City Neon of Morgantown.

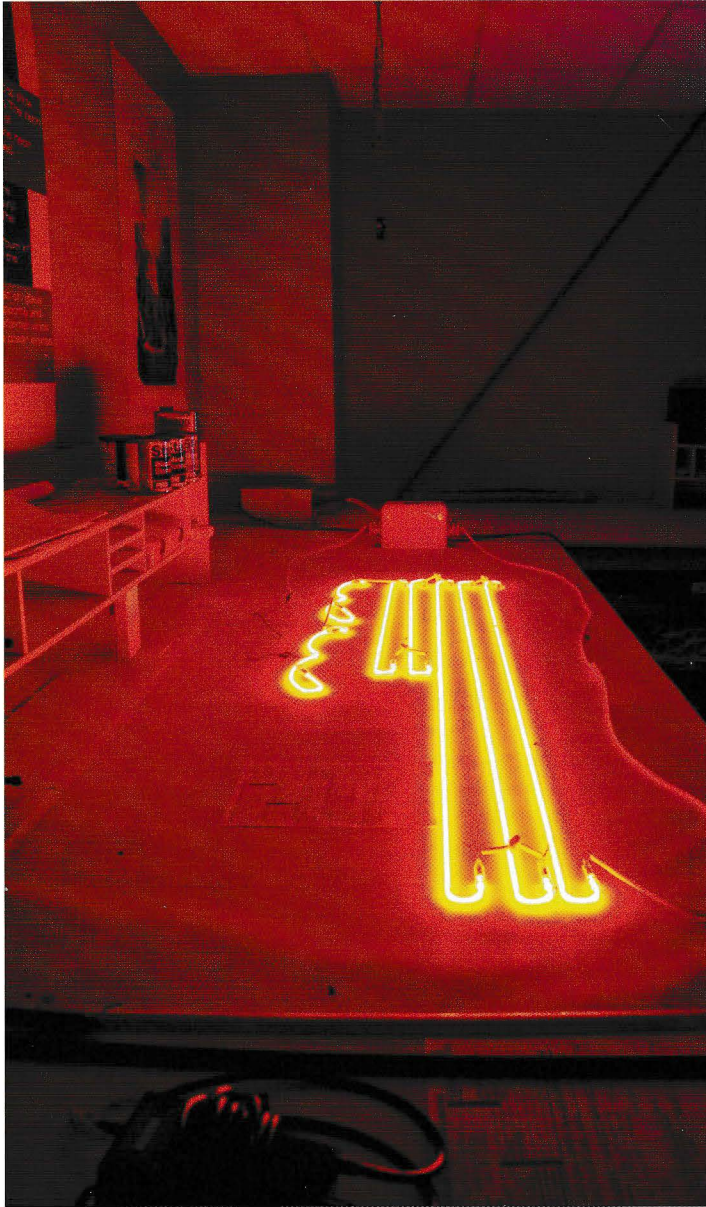
From 1950s diners to Las Vegas cityscapes, few things are as quintessentially American

as the soft, colorful glow of neon lights. For Chris Atkins, that history is also personal. His grandfather started City Neon in the basement of his home. The company now resides in a 30,000-square-foot facility in Morgantown's Chaplin Business Park. Atkins is the third generation to run the company since it was officially incorporated in 1963.

Although the name hasn't changed, neon signs now comprise a small fraction of the company's work. "Back then, that was one of your only two options to light a sign: neon or fluorescent bulbs," Atkins says. "It's almost an art form now." The days of handcrafting

Although City Neon doesn't do much neon anymore, the company has expanded its

services to include LED signs, vinyl banners, car wraps, and more.



custom neon signs are mostly over, since the work requires education and practice in the craft of high-temperature glass blowing. The work is just too costly for most businesses: City Neon's normal shop rate is \$40 per hour, but neon work costs \$60 per hour.

City Neon still gets the occasional call to repair older signs, and CVS pharmacies still use neon in their trademark red lettering. But as its namesake service has declined, City Neon has grown and changed with market forces and now manufactures virtually every type of sign imaginable from simple vinyl sheets to 180-foot high-rise constructions. The company has an entire graphics division

that handles election signs, banners, and vehicle wraps.

These days, the shop's most important piece of equipment is the CNC router, a large device that uses computer-controlled cutting to hollow out lettering in hard materials. Small LED lights are then placed in the hollowed out letters and obscured with a translucent plastic. These signs may not have the nostalgic glow of neon but they look modern, sharp, and produce an eye-catching three-dimensional effect.

"LEDs just make everything so much faster," Atkins says. "LEDs come in with a piece of double-sided sticky tape on them, already pre-wired." They also require less

maintenance and energy to operate.

City Neon is currently constructing new signage for Mon General Hospital, and has played a major role in the construction of the LED-lit Monongahela River model outside the new courthouse in Morgantown.

The company has now moved beyond its early niche into every corner of the market, from nostalgia to cutting edge. And their lights show no sign of dimming any time soon.

written by J. KENDALL PERKINSON

