



PHOTOS BY JULIANA THILL

Chet Kiekhafer of Hutchinson built a custom fishing rod after retiring from 3M five years ago. Then, he built one for his wife, then for family members and friends, and then he started his own business, Crow River Custom Rods.

Hooked on building fishing rods

After building a few fishing rods, Chet Kiekhafer took a real interest in the idea of creating custom-built rods for people and started a business

Chet Kiekhafer's business requires the accuracy of an engineer, the steady hands of a surgeon, the creativity of an artist, and the mastery of an avid angler.

Kiekhafer of Hutchinson incorporates each of these skills as he builds custom fishing rods.

Starting with a bare graphite pole, he turns it into a work of art, with expert craftsmanship. Yet, after he's made rods for his customers, "many times they say, 'I can't use that, it's too good. I have to put it on the wall,' which is why I educate them on the do's and the don'ts," Kiekhafer said. "They (the rods) need to be used, just not abused."

Kiekhafer has been making rods for the past five years, since retiring from 3M in 2011 at age 56.

"I kind of had an inkling that I wanted to try it. My dad had done some rod building 45 years ago, and I have a couple of his rods. He just did it for a few years, but it was always in the back of my mind," Kiekhafer

By Juliana Thill
EDITOR



Chet Kiekhafer's custom-built fishing rods include detailed, artistic work.

said. "Before I retired, I thought this was something I could do — I'm patient; I could handle that. And we have to retire to something, I was told by my financial planner, not from something. So I look at it that way, I retired to do this."

An avid angler

Kiekhafer grew up in Lake Elmo, east of the Twin Cities, and started fishing when he was about 5 years old.

"We fished all the time. Dad took us many different places. We went as a family — three boys and Mom and Dad," he said.

Kiekhafer met his wife, Vickie, who also had been fishing since she was a child, and the two were meant to be together.

"She's loved to fish from the day we met. She knew how to bait the hook," he joked.

They moved around the Twin Cities area while he worked for 3M in Maplewood. In 1990, he transferred to the 3M in Hutchinson, and the Kiekhafers moved to town. He worked as a process engineer, ensuring the large rolls of blue painters tape 3M made were properly converted into the smaller hand-held size rolls sold in stores.

The Kiekhafers have been married 40 years and have two grown daughters, Jessie and Sara, and five grandchildren.

They all plan to go on a fishing trip this summer to Rainy Lake, near International Falls, which is Kiekhafer's favorite place to fish.

His rod-building hobby developed as Kiekhafer thought about how he could catch more fish.

"I wanted a rod to fish for walleyes. I like to fish for walleyes. I may not always be successful, but I like to fish for them," he said with a laugh.

He took a five-minute instructional course at a store in the Twin Cities where he bought his rod-building supplies. Then at home, he watched a few online videos, read some books, asked questions, and "the rest is history," he said.

He started by building a rod for himself. Then he made one for his wife, then family members, then for some friends, and now for customers.

It didn't take long before his hobby turned into a busi-



When Chet Kiekhafer finds the spine of a rod blank, he marks the spot. Then, he uses Morton's Equal Angle Guide Placement System for knowing where to place the guides on the rod. "That's where you're going to spread that load, the fish fight, evenly over this curve. That will give you the durability of the rod and maximize its purpose — strength," he says.

ness, Crow River Custom Rods.

"There was enough interest from other people, and it's to the point where I needed to — not that I was making money — but there were expenses involved."

Advantages of custom-built

Kiekhafer sees a big difference between his rods and those bought at a store. He builds his rods with performance,

strength, durability, and castability in mind.

"A custom-built rod that I build will be built to maximize its durability. It will be technically perfect in that regard. Each rod has a spine like you and I do, and I find that spine, and I build using that in mind," he said. "Then, the rod will — 99 percent of the time — have more guides than a store-bought rod, and that preserves the rod's integrity, gives it more durability, better line control, which means greater accuracy and casting at longer distances."

As he holds the rod vertically, with the base anchored on the floor and the tip of the rod resting in one hand, he feels for the rod's spine with his other hand.

"A rod blank will snap into one spot. That's the spine, I just found it," he said demonstrating his technique.

"When you find the spine, and you bend the rod and release it, it wants to oscillate. If you hold it on the spine, it will oscillate up and down, which means, if it's flexing this way, it will go straight. Now, if it's crooked and oscillating, and you go to throw it, which way is it going to go?"

So, finding the spine and attaching the guides in the proper place will help anglers cast where they are aiming.

When he finds the spine, he marks the spot. Then, he uses Morton's Equal Angle Guide Placement System for knowing where to place the guides.

"I'm not saying all custom rods are built on the spine, but I choose to do it this way. There are many different ways to put the guides on. This has been proven, and it works well," he said.

Building a rod

Before he starts building a rod for a customer, he meets with them to learn more about how they will use the rod, for example, what kind of fish species they want to catch, how do they fish — standing on shore, sitting in a boat — are they right-handed or left-handed, and which hand do they use to cast.

"There are so many rod lengths out there that can be fine-tuned, or rods that are specific to species of fish. You don't want something with a long handle if they have a short arm," he said. "Another way I ask it is, 'what don't you like about the rods you have?'"

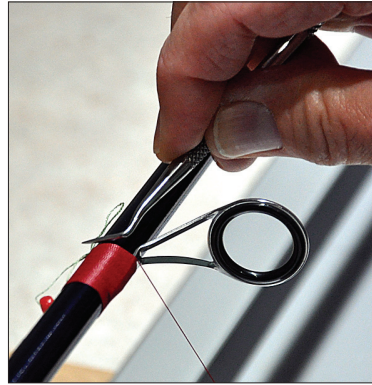
Sometimes it's the littlest thing that can make an angler happy, he said. "You ask where would you like the hook keeper? They'll say, 'I never thought about that.' It's little things that can make it easier to use."

He also wants to know what kind of reel they will put on the rod, because that can affect the guides he attaches.

When the customer approves his plan, the customer provides a down payment, and Kiekhafer orders materials and gets to work.

"I like the interaction with people, the customers, because they have a passion to fish, and I like to fish. And I can help them. I believe that's why they come to see me," he said.

"Last fall, I was watching someone fish on the river over here who was kind of struggling with casting. I talked with him for a while, explained to him what I think I can do. He thought about it, and the next day he came over and he ordered a rod. Three weeks later, he went out and used it, and sent me an email or text message and said it was the best rod he ever had. He caught lots of fish off the river. So,



Chet Kiekhafer, sitting in his basement where he has his some of his fishing rod-building equipment, spins embroidery thread around a fishing rod to attach a guide.



I was glad."

The fishing rods he has built can be found as close to home as Hutchinson, Litchfield and Glencoe, and as far away as Wisconsin, Illinois, Kentucky and Texas.

Workmanship

His custom-built rods start at \$350, and the cost increases depending mainly on the rod blank used and artistic work involved.

"Whatever price point we start at, they will all be made



Chet Kiekhafer builds a variety of rods and incorporates different styles into the rod. The grip on the fishing rod he made for his wife, Vickie, has more than 200 pieces of cork.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Chet Kiekhafer of Hutchinson, third from left, gathers with family and friends at Rainy Lake to show off custom-built fishing rods he made. Joining him are from left, Chet's son-in-law Erik Swanson, daughter Sara Swanson, wife, Vickie; brother Ken Kiekhafer; father, Allen Kiekhafer; friend Dan Gillespie; friend Mary Ann Gillespie; and friend Tom Belderson.

the same, all have the same functionality, all have the same workmanship that goes into them."

The rod blanks come with a manufacturer's warranty. "My workmanship I guarantee forever. If something falls off, let me know, and I'll make it right," he said.

He makes the grips based on what customers want, from the type of material, to color, to how it balances the rod.

For the grip on his wife Vickie's fishing rod, he used more than 200 pieces of cork inlays to create a checkered design.

"It could be as fancy as this, or fancier. The sky's the limit," he said.

Other grips he has built have been created from cedar, stabilized wood, foam, and acrylic, which come in a variety of colors and patterns.

Initially, Kiekhafer wasn't interested in the artistic part of building a custom rod.

"Not at first, it was just, build the rod functionally, put the grip on it, put the guides on it, go use it, and have fun," he said.

That was, until 2011, when he attended a sportsman's show in the Twin Cities and met Kris Kristufek with LakeLady Custom Fishing Rods, based in Breezy Point, Minnesota. Kiekhafer learned Kristufek was going to teach an advanced rod-building class that involved adding artistic touches to fishing rods, and Kiekhafer signed up.

"He's been my mentor, so to speak. He's world renowned," Kiekhafer said.

Now, Kiekhafer has drawers full of plastic containers that hold nearly every shade of embroidery thread imaginable.

"I'm using the other side of my brain that I haven't used in 35 years because I was working in the industry," he said.

"I never thought I would really get into all the artistic things. It was more of building a functional, superior rod first — and I still pride myself on doing that. Then, if I or the individual would like to have something above and

beyond that, in terms of artistic things, we can do that, as well. But first comes the functionality of the rod, making it the best it can be," he said.

Since he began, Kiekhafer learned from expert rod builders and then broadened his knowledge after joining the Custom Rod Builders Guild, which is based in Texas but has regional chapters. The guild, which has members around the world, promotes the craft and teaching the craft.

"It's fun meeting the people and interacting. You get to network, and that's where it really pays off for me," he said. "I had to build a fishing rod a year and a half ago that I had never built before — a short, salt-water rod. I didn't want to turn it down, so I had at least a half a dozen people across the country help me design what was required. I wouldn't have been able to do that if I hadn't joined the guild."

Kiekhafer has shared his knowledge with others, as well. He taught students how to build a fishing rod as part of two science classes at Hutchinson High School, and this spring he taught a weekend class on building a custom fishing rod through Hutchinson Community Education.

He also performs repairs on other fishing rods, whether it's fixing broken guides or grips.

Kiekhafer enjoys every part of building a fishing rod. "As far as making the rod, I really like it all," he said. "I like putting the guides on because now it's a fishing rod. I like putting the grip on because they're all so unique. Then, the decoration makes it one of a kind because no two are the same."

And as far as retiring and starting a new career, "I've been happy ever since," he said.

For more information about Chet Kiekhafer and his business, visit his website at www.crowrivercustomrods.com, email him at chet@crowrivercustomrods.com or call him at 320-761-5887.