

Luke's Rare Art Raises Funds for Conservation

by **Mark LaBarbera**

Young Luke Thielen was surprised at the SCI Minnesota Chapter's annual fundraiser when one of his four-foot-tall patchworks of animal hides depicting the African continent sold for more than \$1,000, was donated back, and re-sold for more than \$1,000.

The African wall art, coasters and patchwork placemats were popular items at Luke's Animal Artworks booth Friday and Saturday before the auction. Now they are attracting attention from other SCI chapters buying this young conservationist's originals for their auctions, and from individual members who want to help the cause and help themselves invest in one of his early works of art before prices increase.

"American-made original artworks like this are sure to go up, especially when people hear the story behind them," said former State Senator Bob Lessard who, along with NFL Hall of Fame Coach Bud Grant, was honored at the event by SCI for years of service to hunters and conservation.

The story he's talking about is how then 11-year-old Luke Thielen was given pieces trimmed from hides at Taxidermy Unlimited owned by Marv and Betty Gaston, long time SCI Life Members and donors. He brought the pieces home and laid them out all over the living room floor. His mom urged him to create something with his hides so they could be displayed, possibly for his big year-end school project.

Luke asked the guys at the taxidermy shop for ideas. "Greg was the one who said I should make them into the continent of Africa," Luke recalled. He painted blue an ugly sheet of scrap plywood from his garage so the uncovered parts would look like oceans. Luke traced the continent on the plywood and cut out paper pieces of the African countries, using them for his template for cutting the hides, which he glued onto the wood.

His mother Sandy said, "The project took a lot of time and patience, but the end product turned out really amazing. It was a colorful patchwork of hides."

Dad Jim Thielen said Luke used the map in 2009 for a school report on Africa and wildebeest.

Luke showed the project to his buddies at Taxidermy Unlimited. Owner Marv Gaston said, "I thought it turned out great, and told

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--Luke's mother, Sandy Thielen

Luke that if he learned how to cut and glue the hides with a few tricks of the trade he just might be able to sell them. That is, if they weren't on plywood."

Sandy said, "With the help and knowledge of Taxidermy Unlimited and their staff, Luke came up with his African map design, the proper backing material, and new found skills at trimming hides. He began creating his artwork after school and on weekends."

The Gastons displayed his first map in their showroom, where Marv and Betty began to tell Luke's story to customers. Once the first piece sold, he made another, and then it sold, and then another. Realizing that his hand-made works of art might continue to sell, Luke decided to create a business, pick a name for it, open a bank account for it, and start learning how a business works.

Gastons helped secure a booth for "Luke's Animal Artworks," which the Thielen family worked at together.





"Everyone at Safari Club has been so good to Luke," said Jim.

Sandy added, "It has been a wonderful learning experience. It still amazes us to realize how a gift of hides and lots of help and direction from friendly hunters has been the most wonderful gift a boy could have received. And the Gastons have been a wonderful role model for Luke. They have shown him that a passion can be turned into profit, and coached him on money matters and how to be a good worker, care about others and be the best you can be. They have been a true blessing."

A Young Man of Few Words

Artist Luke Thielen prefers to give Yes or No answers, a trait we wish he could teach to politicians. Here are the lengthy answers to our questions that provide additional insight into the mind of this young entrepreneur:

Q: What did you think when Marv told you a professionally done map would sell.

Luke: I was excited.

Q: What was your favorite thing about the SCI banquet?

Luke: Meeting different people.

Q: What didn't you like about the weekend?

Luke: If I had to stay another day I might lose my voice.

Q: What was the hardest thing about making your first professional map?

Luke: Taking time and having patience to do a really good job.

Q: What would you hunt if you went to Africa?

Luke: A leopard, because they are pretty and neat.

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