

# Buckner bike-maker provides custom ride

Don Walker has built bicycles for elite cyclists

By Emily Hagedorn

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The Courier-Journal

Don Walker considers himself something like a tailor, but instead of a needle and thread, he uses steel tubing and table mills.

The bicycle-maker sizes up his customers with just a few looks and questions and then comes up with a concept, the seat height and handlebar angles lengthened or shortened to fit perfectly.

This talent and eye for detail are responsible for his popularity, and now he has brought those skills to Buckner, where he has set up his new shop, making one-of-a-kind cycles.

"I love the finished product, actually putting them out on the road and watching them ride the bike," said Walker, 45.

Roughly 500 bikes have come together through his hands during his 20-year career, with some of the cycles going to Olympians and Union Cycliste Internationale Track World Championships participants.

Matt Haldeman, who lives in Seattle, has commissioned three bikes from Walker with another to follow shortly.

"They're gorgeous pieces of work," he said. "The bike feels like it's a part of me when I'm out on the track."

Walker found his way to handmade bikes in somewhat of a roundabout way.

He competed in track races when he was young, but after high school he trained to be an aircraft mechanic and would go on to work on Air Force and Navy aircraft and Lear and Challenger jets.



Don Walker lines up the steel tubing that will form the frame of a new bike at his shop in Buckner.

JOHN SOMMERS II/SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-JOURNAL

## DON WALKER CYCLES

» To learn more about Don Walker Cycles, go to [www.donwalkercycles.com](http://www.donwalkercycles.com).

## MORE PHOTOS

» An online gallery is at [courier-journal.com/northeast](http://courier-journal.com/northeast).

In 1990, a part of his bike cracked and he took it to the bike shop across the street from his airplane hanger in Santa Barbara, Calif.

He asked so many questions that finally the frame builder, who had just gotten a new jig that holds the tubes together, asked Walker if he would like his old one, so that he could dabble on his own.

The passion grew from there, and eventually Walker would pass on the jig to another amateur bike-maker.

"That jig has probably been seen 20 different owners over its life span," he said.

He now makes road, track, single speed, mountain, tandem and cross bike frames, which average \$3,000 each.

Walker would also become known for his fillet brazing, a technique that makes the tubes look seamlessly connected.

"I was kind of smitten with his work," said Halde- man, of when he first saw Walker's bikes. "The joinery was just very beautiful."

Walker operated a retail shop in Indianapolis but recently decided he wanted to focus just on making bikes.

He and his fiancee moved into a home in Buckner in October. It has two attached garages, which have become his work studios. Walker has an 11-year-old daughter, Julianna.

Walker said he lives in a thriving cycling area.

The Union Cycliste Internationale Cyclocross World Championships are being held in Louisville next January.

"Louisville is probably the best kept secret for a cycle city," he said. "The people who are here know what a good scene it is."

Reporter Emily Hagedorn can be reached at (502) 582-4621.

ACHIEVER | NIKITA PERUMAL

# Writing contest winner is an environmentalist

Elaine Rooker Jack

Special to The Courier-Journal

For Nikita Perumal, 17, the Conservation Writing Contest was a convergence of two of her passions: writing and environmentalism.

Nikita is the state winner of the 2011 Conservation Writing Contest, sponsored by the Kentucky Division of Conservation. She first won at DuPont Manual High School, where she is a senior, and advanced to win at the district level for the Jefferson County Conservation District.

For being the district winner she received a certificate and a T-shirt. She was recognized as the county winner at an awards ceremony April 19 at the Gheens Academy, where she read her essay aloud and was presented with a plaque and a \$100 award. At the state level she received a coffee-table book, a certificate and \$250.

In addition, teacher Glenn Zwanzig received on behalf of DuPont Manual a \$500 environmental education grant — money provided by Jefferson County Farm Bureau.

Nikita lives in the Highlands with her mother, Manju Ahuja. Her father, Narayanan Perumal, lives in Indianapolis.

Nikita is active in the Manual Environmental Club and has served as president for two years.

For two years she has participated in "I love Mountains Day," a lobbying event in Frankfort organized by Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, where participants stand up for clean water, clean energy and an end to mountaintop removal coal mining.

Writing the essay was an assignment for her AP Environmental Science class. Zwanzig chose three essays from the class to enter in the contest.

Nikita says she would have wanted to enter the contest even if the essay had not been a class assignment. "I drew on some ideas I've accumulated over the years, and I'm passionate about writing," she said, adding that she's considering majors in English



## NIKITA PERUMAL

Age: 17

Grade: 12

School: Manual

Hobbies: Reading, writing, playing the clarinet

## READ NIKITA'S WINNING ESSAY

» Go to [www.courier-journal.com/neighborhoods](http://www.courier-journal.com/neighborhoods) and click on the story.

and environmental law.

"Nikita is a true conservationist and she is an incredible writer," said Zwanzig. "Her feelings about conservation come out strongly in her writings. She wants to awaken the world and let people know about what we are doing to ourselves."

He noted that her essay "was very expressive," and added, "Nikita believes strongly in what she writes about."

"The point I wanted to make" in the essay, she said, "was that we don't consider the environment a lot of times. We don't make it a priority on a day-to-day basis. We have to work on changing our mindset by becoming informed and changing our lifestyles."

She said there are many things individuals can do, such as carpool and insulate their homes, and students can print their papers on

both sides. Her club has encouraged teachers with sunny classrooms to switch off the lights and take advantage of natural light.

She says that in Kentucky, which has a prominent coal presence, individuals need to encourage more political support of sustainability and new energy sources.

Nikita says she's been writing since she was very young. "There's something beautiful about words and how they can be woven together to express," she said.

"I read a ton when I was a child, and my parents read to me, and I was fascinated by the process of storytelling. I was attracted to writers who were good with prose and used interesting and illuminating phrases to express themselves."

In addition to her interests in writing and environmental law, Nikita is also interested in psychology and international relations.

She has been accepted to four colleges and is planning to wait for responses from two more, as well as financial aid offers, before deciding which to attend in the fall.