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**UW-Stout students making tracks in music scene by printing T-shirts**

**By Jon Swedien**
Leader-Telegram staff

If you're into Eau Claire's music scene, you've probably seen Aaron Brice and Tim Brunner's handiwork.

Brice, 22, of Eau Claire, and Brunner, 23, of Green Bay, have built their apparel business, Ambient Inks, from scratch by printing T-shirts for area indie rock bands, including Grammy Award-winning Bon Iver, Halloween Alaska and We Are the Willows.

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"During the school year most kids make about two (shirts); he made about 50," Crotty said.
In 2009 Brice and Brunner's hobby began to morph into a business.

That year they traveled to Chicago to buy a used piece of screen printing equipment. Brunner said they got a good deal on the equipment, which he found through a family friend.

Although the equipment, upon which shirts are printed, still required manual operation, it allowed Brice and Brunner to print many more shirts than printing by hand.

Meanwhile, Brice's older brother, Clayton, who played in local bands, introduced Ambient Inks to people in Eau Claire's music scene.

In spring 2010, the company received one of its first big jobs, printing T-shirts for We Are the Willows, a band hailing from Minneapolis and signed to Eau Claire-based Amble Down Records.

"I think that was when we realized it was a business. We had people relying on us," Brice said.

Other jobs followed.

Ambient Inks' biggest break came last spring when Bon Iver, which won two Grammy Awards on Feb. 12, chose Ambient Inks to print shirts for the band's "Bon Iver, Bon Iver" album.

Brice and Brunner said while they had worked with several regional bands, they didn't expect Bon Iver would ever send them an invoice.

"I had this idea in my head that it would never happen," Brice said. "He's so big. We're so small."

It was a big job. Brice and Brunner spent several days in the basement of their house in Menomonie printing shirt after shirt around the clock.

"It was pretty crazy," Brunner said, adding they appreciated that the popular band gave them a chance.

The job allowed the company to buy an automatic press - a larger, more efficient piece of printing equipment - and to move into its current location in the same building as The Community Table.

With the new press - which looks like a "giant octopus," Brice said - Ambient Inks was able to perform its biggest job to date, printing the thousands of T-shirts needed for a recent Bon Iver tour.
Bhaskar Gaddam, a UW-Stout communications technology professor who has taught Brice and Brunner, said he's not surprised by Ambient Inks' success.

The students are very focused on their business, Gaddam said. "It's all they really want to do."

In addition to shirts, Ambient Inks also prints posters, hats and other apparel. The company has branched out to print apparel for local businesses and clubs.

Working with bands, Brice and Brunner said, remains their favorite part of their gig. They have plenty of time to listen to music when printing shirts, they added.

Now the duo is working to keep Ambient Inks growing. They are building a website, which they believe will help them connect with new customers. They also hope to hire an in-house graphic designer to come up with original designs - currently shirt designs are submitted - and a production assistant.

While they've taken a little time off from school to focus on the business, both are close to finishing and plan to return for their degrees.

In the meantime, they're enjoying Ambient Inks' success.

"It's pretty much already been a dream come true," Brunner said

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