



Big Ass fans help keep revelers cool at a recent Thursday Night Live in the Fifth Third Bank Pavilion in downtown Lexington.





# BIGGER IS BETTER

Memorable name helps  
Lexington fan company  
conquer the globe

By Vickie Mitchell / Photos by Mark Mahan

bigger is better



Big Ass Solutions founder Carey Smith listened to customers when deciding to change the company's name from HVLS Fan Co.

In 1999 the Lexington-based HVLS Fan Co. began selling gigantic industrial ceiling fans. They whirled lazily and moved lots of air without using lots of energy. The acronym HVLS described how the fans worked — high volume, low speed.

The big fans kept workers in factories and warehouses cooler and more productive. They kept cows comfortable in the summer heat so that the animals would continue to eat and produce milk.

Customers loved the fans' cooling effects. But no one cared much for the company's name.

"Customers would say, 'HVLS? What is that anyway? Don't you make those big ass fans?' " said company

founder and owner Carey Smith.

HVLS took note and eventually changed its name to one of the most memorable in business, Big Ass Fans. It was a fortuitous move.

In the years since, Big Ass Solutions, as the company is now called, has become a Kentucky-based business success story. From 2009 to 2015, its annual revenue grew from \$34 million to more than \$200 million. It made *Forbes'* list of America's Best Small Companies this year and, for the eighth year in a row, the Kentucky's Best Places to Work list. Its products routinely get recognized for energy efficiency and innovation.

"We were lucky, lucky in that sense," said Smith. "I can call almost anyone in the world, and they want to go home and tell their significant other, 'I talked to a guy from Big Ass Fans today, and he calls himself the chief big ass.' People do get a kick out of the name."



## Great name nothing without a great product

Smith, an economics major, had left corporate America after several unfulfilling stints and eventually became an entrepreneur. In 1992 he and his family moved to Lexington, and he launched a company that focused on sprinkler technology, but it was never as successful as he had hoped. So, when he saw a commercial ceiling fan developed by an agricultural engineer in California that used aerodynamic principles to increase air movement, he realized it had more potential than his sprinkler company. At age 46, he launched HVLS in Lexington to sell the fans.

Smith admits he didn't give much thought at the time to Lexington's virtues as a home base for his company. After all, when he was growing up, his family moved a lot — they lived in eight states — so he had learned that you can live, work, and be successful in a lot of places. But, he said, as Big Ass evolved and fan production moved to Lexington, "I realized it offered a lot of opportunity geographically, with more or less a central location for shipping." In the years since, he's seen a number of advantages, including a steady stream of graduates from the University of Kentucky and other nearby schools. "And, it is a place people appreciate and come back to."

## A donkey named Fanny grabs attention

Few in Lexington knew about HVLS until the company changed its name and painted its mascot, a donkey named Fanny, on the side of its headquarters on Winchester Road. Fanny faced traffic, posterior first, and drivers, literally faced with a big ass, were either riled or amused. The mural definitely raised awareness of Big Ass Fans.

Today the company has regional offices around the United States and operations in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, and its Lexington offices and manufacturing



Fanny, the company's mascot, certainly got her share of attention on the side of the former Winchester Road headquarters.

facilities encompass six locations. The original headquarters is still in use, as the company's warranty division. Its second headquarters, on Merchant Drive off Leestown Road, is now a production facility where commercial fans are made. A second manufacturing facility nearby produces lights and residential fans. On 40 acres off Citation Boulevard on Innovation Drive, Big Ass built a research and development lab in 2009 and a new headquarters in 2013. It has also leased an office building across from headquarters and will soon move some staff there because headquarters is already overflowing. "We probably recognize at this point we will outgrow everything," said Smith.

In 2006, the company had only 50 staff. In the past two years the number of employees has doubled from 500 to about 1,000,

## A FEW BIG FACTS ABOUT BIG ASS SOLUTIONS

In 1999, its first year, the company sold 112 fans.

» Just 10 years ago, Big Ass Fans had 50 employees. Today, it has about 1,000.

» The company's largest fan is the 24-foot PPX 3.0 Powerfoil Plus. It also makes the world's largest oscillating fan. Six feet in diameter, that fan has 72 positions.

» In 2009, annual revenue was \$34 million; Big Ass expects revenue of \$275 million this year and \$1 billion by 2020.

» In 2012, the company launched its Haiku division. Haiku is the only residential ceiling fan made in America.

» In 2014, the company changed its name from Big Ass Fans to Big Ass

Solutions, signaling its intent to branch into other products, among them lighting. It now makes LED lighting, 24,000-lumen boxes that are proven popular in manufacturing, warehouses, showrooms fitness centers and other spaces where bright lights that use less energy are needed.



## bigger is better

and the privately held company continues to add staff.

Reed Schneider, supervisor at the commercial and industrial fan production plant, is reminded each week just how fast Big Ass is growing. “I do the onboarding tour for new employees on Mondays, and there are 12 to 20 people each week,” he said.

### Big aspirations fuel big growth

The company is growing rapidly because it

makes many models of fans — about 25 at the moment — and it is venturing into new product lines, including residential fans and lighting.

Its residential fan, Haiku, is the only residential ceiling fan made in the United States. Smith realized the potential home ceiling fans offered

after he heard that homeowners were spending upward of \$7,000 to buy and install a Big Ass Fan industrial model. “That told me that people didn’t like their [existing] fans,” he said.

The company’s Big Ass Light, a line of LED industrial lighting fixtures, efficiently brightens warehouses, facto-



## BIG ASS BENEFITS THE BARNYARD

Big Ass Solutions’ ties to the barnyard go far beyond the coy donkey named Fanny that is the company’s mascot and logo. Agriculture has always been a key market for its gargantuan fans.

In fact, the first farm critters to luxuriate beneath cooling Big Ass breezes were dairy cows. The fans became a hit with dairy farmers because they helped increase milk production in the heat of summer. When cows get hot, they won’t eat. And when they don’t eat, they don’t produce as much milk.

“Cow comfort was our main push,” said Megan Begley, a sales manager who specializes in the agriculture market for Big Ass Solutions. “Animal comfort is a huge thing in the ag world.”

Within the agriculture segment, the equine industry is also a big fan of the big fans.

Debbie Spike-Pierce, a veterinarian with Rood & Riddle

Equine Hospital, sees the fans often when she visits Lane’s End, Denali Stud, and other clients’ farms. “They [the fans] have a lot of uses in the horse community,” she said.

For one, although most Thoroughbred barns are well ventilated, the fans keep air moving when the wind is still. “The fans really help in moving air when you don’t have a breeze,” Spike-Pierce said. “Clients have also told me that the fans have cut down on birds and flies in the barns.”

Rood & Riddle uses the industrial ceiling fans to keep staff comfortable in the hospital’s five-bay ambulatory garage, where veterinarians restock their trucks with supplies. In the summer, the fans move air in the un-airconditioned garage; in the winter, they help push cold air out and preserve the heat.

In 2010, WinStar Farm installed several Big Ass ceiling fans in its training barn; it added the fans in its stallion barn and breeding sheds a couple of years later. “We wanted to get the air moving and provide a better atmosphere for the horses,” said Elliott Walden, CEO and president. “They move a lot of air. So, instead of having 39 box fans that no one was enthralled with from an electrical/fire standpoint, we have six of them [Big Ass fans].”


Thoroughbred farms use different sizes and types of fans, based on their facilities and needs. Some use Big Ass’ large, mobile box fans like the Yellow Jacket and Black Jack, which are also popular for sporting events or in industrial settings. Others use Big Ass’s residential line of ceiling fans, called Haiku, over individual stalls. The Haiku fans are prettier than the industrial line. “The equine world puts more emphasis on the aesthetics,” said Begley.

Animal comfort is only one aspect of agriculture use. The fans are also being used to help keep produce fresh. “They need air movement to reduce the spoilage rate,” said Begley. “Each ag segment has a specific need, so we have this huge product line that we are able to offer.”

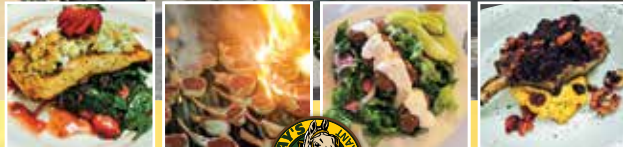



WinStar Farm uses Big Ass fans to keep its valuable stallions comfortable.



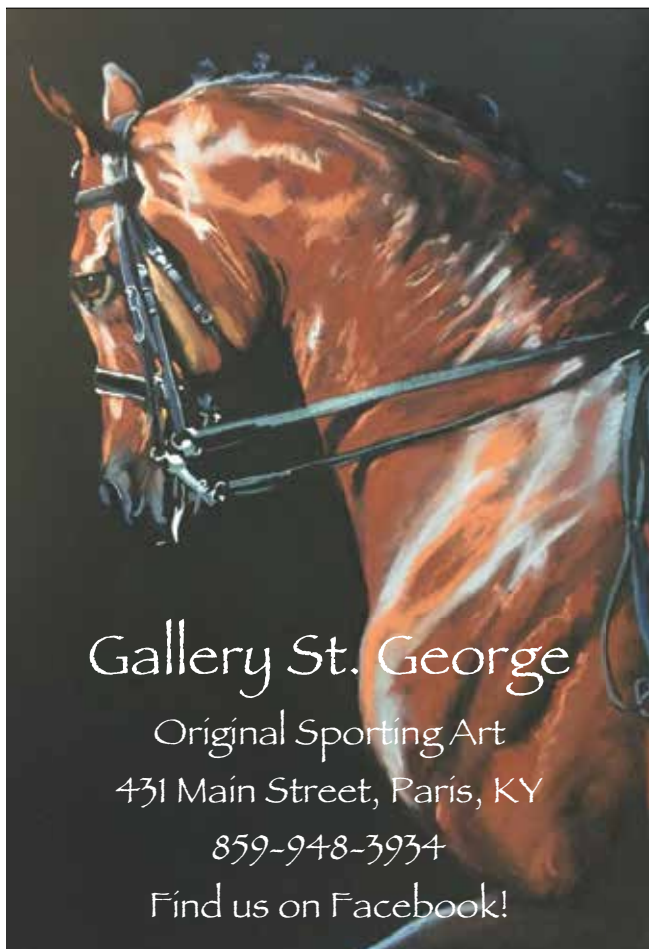



**Clay's DOWNTOWN RESTAURANT**  
STEAKS • SEAFOOD • VEGETARIAN

There is always  
a friendly face at Clay's.  
We put 200 years of our name  
behind it, it's that good!

730 Main Street, Paris, Ky 40361 • 859.987.6000  
Catering available



**Gallery St. George**  
Original Sporting Art  
431 Main Street, Paris, KY  
859-948-3934  
Find us on Facebook!

# B. Shiftlet

IMAGES OF KENTUCKY



LANDSCAPES • THOROUGHBRED • EQUINE IMAGES

from **SECRETARIAT** to **AMERICAN PHAROAH**

including selected  
images from *THE Long Run* COLLECTION



QUALITY CUSTOM FRAMING

BOBBY SHIFLET, PROPRIETOR • 859-987-0172  
630 MAIN STREET • PARIS, KENTUCKY 40361  
HOURS: MONDAY-FRIDAY 10-6 • SATURDAY 10-4

For more than 30 years,  
known for fine Kentucky  
and Equine Antiques,  
Books and Art.



Lyn and Margaret Layton  
624 Main Street Paris, KY 40361  
Mon - Sat, 10 am to 4 pm and by appointment  
859.987.7070  
[www.facebook.com/LochLeaAntiques](http://www.facebook.com/LochLeaAntiques)

## bigger is better



LED light aimed at the agriculture market can safely be washed down when it gets dirty.

Big Ass' recent rapid growth probably comes as a surprise to most Lexingtonians, Smith said. "The big thing is they don't know how big we are."

### An emphasis on engineering and R&D

Product development has been key, hence the company's more than 75 engineers. Brittany Adam is among what she calls "a whole bunch of really nerdy engineers." As she describes her coworkers — engineers who've worked on submarines, on racecars, on gadgets

ries, and barns, the same spaces that Big Ass has long been cooling with its fans. The lighting is durable, so tough, says the company, that it survives being run over by a truck. A new portable

for the CIA— she adds, "there are brilliant people here."

That brilliance is backed up by the company's wall of patents in its bright lobby. Investing more than twice the average in research and development has paid off — Big Ass has 145 patents and nearly as many patents pending. Among the patents lining the wall is one that only the most alert readers catch — it proclaims Big Ass had a hand in the creation of fire.

Research and development isn't just a department housed in the lab down the street from headquarters. In addition to Adam and her coworkers, there's the Kitchen, an official incubator for ideas. The staff is a mixed bag



Clockwise from top, popular models include the mobile light stand, Black Jack, and Haiku.

## SILICON VALLEY VIBE

Beyond the name, Big Ass Solutions has become known for putting a different spin on American manufacturing.

As bells ring and music blasts to signal big sales or as staff toss the fist-size foam Fanny the Donkeys to break the tension, headquarters can seem like a frat house. For one, the company's average age skews young. "We're not focused on hiring talent from other companies; we're focused on building talent," said company founder Carey Smith.

In keeping with the collegiate vibe, headquarters can also feel like a science lab, with more than 75 engineers and some 60 interns from around the state.

Employee benefits are

more the stuff of Silicon Valley than of Lexington, Kentucky. A beer fridge is cracked open just before quitting time when sales milestones are met. In the warehouse, pingpong tables await friendly battles and a fleet of loaner bikes is ready for lunchtime rides. A healthy lunch is offered Monday through Thursday in the employee cafeteria, and Big Ass pays half the cost of the meal. On Fridays there's "guest" catering — anything from Oasis Mediterranean restaurant to barbecue. Fruit stations are stocked around offices two days a week — the company goes through about 500 pounds of fruit a week, but, to balance, doughnuts are

brought in each Friday.

A staff of two coordinates activities and outings: bowling nights, trips to Kings Island, evenings at Comedy Off Broadway. There are the traditional company sports teams, including Ultimate Frisbee and dodgeball.

Some of the fun is off-the-cuff, spur of the moment, like a 50-yard dash between two coworkers in the parking lot at lunchtime. Akash Hira, a Lexington native, lost the race and had to wear a T-shirt with his opponent's face on it.

"I'm forever stamped as a loser," he said with a laugh, but he's also better known now among his coworkers as the contest was heavily promoted on TV screens around headquarters.



Smith says the company is "focused on building talent."

"The atmosphere is crazy here; it is probably nothing like you would imagine an office to be like," said Hira, a University of Kentucky economics graduate. "I don't know how to describe it — it's just Big Ass. But we do stay professional while we have fun."






# QUILLIN

## Leather & Tack

**Add A Little Quillin Color!**  
**Just Think Pink ...**  
**And A Whole Lot More!**  
 Visit Our Main Street Store  
 Call, Click Or Come By

The Finest In Personalized  
 Hand Crafted Gifts ... Since 1982.  
 Over 17,000 Halters A Year  
 Are Made In Our Paris Shop  
 We're Kentucky's Largest Custom Shop!

Plus A Large Selection Of Pet Collars And  
 Great Gifts For Horse Enthusiast Of All Ages!  
 Hours: 8 - 5:00 Saturday 9 - 12:00

1929 Main Street • Paris, Kentucky 40361  
 1.800.729.0592 • Quillin.com • facebook.com/QuillinLeather



## The Guesthouse at Rosecrest Farm

Enjoy the beauty and serenity  
 of a Bed & Breakfast visit at  
 the guesthouse of a  
 thoroughbred farm.

## Rosecrest Farm

Lyra and Charles Miller  
 1276 Winchester Rd • Paris, KY 40361  
 859.987.7500 • [www.rosecrestfarm.net](http://www.rosecrestfarm.net)

## Discover Paris & Bourbon County



Located in Central Kentucky,  
 Bourbon County is characterized by rich farmland  
 and is known for  
 "Horses, History, and Hospitality".  
 Famous for their thoroughbred horses, picturesque  
 farms, and scenic drives  
 through stone fence lined beautiful farmland; Paris  
 is truly a horse-lover's dream come true. Explore  
 historic Downtown Paris.



This Victorian era Main Street is lined with galler-  
 ies, antique shops, museums, restaurants, a micro-  
 brewery, and a boutique distillery. Experience real  
 Southern charm and hospitality by visiting this jewel  
 of the Bluegrass.

Located just 15 miles from Lexington; Paris and  
 Bourbon County are a must visit while staying in  
 Central Kentucky.

For more information visit:

[www.ParisKY.com](http://www.ParisKY.com)

(859)-987-6237





bigger is better



Big Ass fans can be found around town at Local Taco (above left) and West Sixth Street Brewery (above) as well as in the Keeneland sales pavilion (left).

of professionals and interns — everything from history majors to computer coders — who intensively research and evaluate ideas for future areas that the company can plunge into, among them, how to help people sleep better.

There's also an emphasis on making products that improve environments. The company built a quieter fan motor. Its fans can, depending on the space they are used in, cut energy costs up to 30 percent. Its products earn high ratings for low energy use.

### Aspirations, like fans, are huge

Smith didn't set out to create a company with a kick-ass name, but it does seem to fit a company that stubbornly refuses to take the well-trod path.

"The name does say that we are contrarian, and we do things in a different way, and we do things the way we want to do things."

The company has remained privately owned, which allows it to make decisions quickly. It opts to sell direct to customers and keeps all functions in-house — from customer service to sales. Not only does that give it more control over quality and



BIG ASS SOLUTIONS

service, it allows Big Ass to pay employees better. Its employees' average annual wages are 40 percent above the average in Kentucky and 20 percent above the average in the United States.

Good pay is a necessity to build a dedicated and inspired team needed to create and build new products as well as sell and service them. "We will do anything for our customers," Smith said. "But you can't say you treat your customers as the most

important people in the world then have them call someone who doesn't know anything about the product."

Today, Big Ass fans are a common sight in Lexington. They whirl quietly above beer drinkers at West Sixth Brewing; partygoers at the Livery; baseball fans at Whitaker Bank Ballpark; and farmers market shoppers at the Fifth Third Pavilion downtown. They cool horse barns and homes; school libraries and church sanctuaries. But Big Ass has gone far beyond the Bluegrass. Its products have been sold in 125 countries; more than 60 percent of Fortune 500 companies are customers.

"People think about us for fans, and now lights and maybe HVAC," said Smith. But he predicts there is much, much more in the company's future, "things I can't even imagine at the moment," he said. "There are an infinite number of things we might get into." **KM**

### IF YOU GO

Want to see how a Big Ass Fan is made? The company offers tours of its industrial and commercial fan production facility, located at 2425 Merchant St. off Lee-stown Road, at noon each Tuesday. Space is limited and reservations are required. To make reservations, send an email to [TourBig@bigasssolutions.com](mailto:TourBig@bigasssolutions.com).