THE ENTREPRENEUR

By Ardis Coffman

When Mikus King was in first grade he offered to walk the neighbor's Chow each day before and after school. He liked the dog and looked forward to their time together, since he had no dog of his own. The grateful neighbor gave him a dollar a week. He would have given him more, but Mikus' father, Big Mike, deemed a dollar a week sufficient cash for a six year old.

Soon in addition to walking the dog, the boy mowed lawns and washed cars. When the ice cream truck rounded the corner, Mikus never ran inside to ask his mother for money as the other children did. He always had a coin or two in his pocket.

At first his parents bragged to family and friends about their young son's achievements, but as time went on they grew resentful and never mentioned it. It seemed wrong to them somehow that their little boy showed such unchildlike self-sufficiency. He received no allowance but always had money. No charmingly misglued trinket boxes or misfitting handmade belts appeared under their Christmas tree. Mikus' gifts were practical and expensive, a new vacuum cleaner for his mother, a set of Craftsmen tools for his father. They cooed over the handmade gifts friends received from their children and never mentioned to anyone the gifts Mikus gave them.

One day Mikus heard his mother talking to a neighbor about washing windows. He was ten at the time. Both women agreed they detested the job. Mikus considered what he overheard. He knew people paid to get out of work they hated. Later that day, when he accompanied his father downtown, he saw a shop owner cleaning windows with a long handled Squeegee.

"Mom does that different," he said to his father. "She uses a whole roll of paper towels when she washes windows and she rubs and rubs until she's really tired. Why doesn't she use a pole with a rubber end like that man?"

"Don't know, son," said the senior Mike. "Your mother is one of the mysteries of the universe."

Big Mike had brought his son downtown for a visit to the bookstore, but first they made a stop at the hardware store. While his father looked at the selection of hammers, Mikus priced a long handled Squeegee and realized he could buy it with the money his grandmother sent him for his tenth birthday.

"You're buying a Squeegee with your birthday money?" said Big Mike, as his son pushed the device toward the clerk. "I thought you wanted a book?"

"I got an idea," Mikus mumbled. "A way to make money." Big Mike gave the hardware store clerk a shrug. "Kids," he said.

As soon as Mikus got home he offered to clean the neighbor's windows, just to try out his new equipment. She insisted on giving him three dollars. In the next few days he called on every housewife on the street. Few turned him down. All were delighted with their sparkling windows. Within a week Mikus was able to buy the book he wanted, plus three others, and he still tucked 50 dollars away in his dresser drawer under his Cub Scout uniform.

I'd have more money, he thought, if I didn't have to spend so much on window cleaner. He read the label on the product his mother used and wrote down the

ingredients. At the drugstore he priced the chemicals and discovered he could make his own mixture for about a quarter of the price. That night he collected bottles and mixed liquids. When the noxious fumes burned his nose, he looked around the basement for something good smelling. On a shelf near his mother's homemade jelly, he found peppermint flavoring left over from Christmas candy. He poured it into the mixture just to see what would happen. He was, after all, still a little boy. The window cleaner fizzed and bubbled and gave off a candy odor. It smells pink, it should be pink, Mikus thought. He found red food coloring and poured it into his mix until he achieved the color he wanted. That will make the job more fun, he decided.

The ladies, whose windows he cleaned, asked what product he used. He wafted the pink peppermint liquid under their noses. They loved it. Soon, in addition to the window service, he sold Peppermint Magic Glass Cleaner. He tripled the price it cost him for ingredients, and he still sold it for less than the cleaner at the A & P.

Residents of his suburb wondered about the boy they saw each day riding a red Schwinn with a bucket on one handle bar, a canvass bag filled with pink bottles on the other, and a telescoping Squeegee on the carrier at the back. Sometimes they stopped him and asked what he was doing. In that time children were not so afraid of strangers, and adults did not fear they would be mistaken for a molester if they spoke to a child. Many of the people who asked "Whatcha doin'?" became customers.

Through that hot summer Mikus spent his days cleaning windows. In the evenings he mixed Peppermint Magic in the basement. His mother answered the phone and the doorbell, so Mikus paid her a percentage of his profits to act as his saleswoman and scheduler. His mother thought it wrong to be paid by her ten year old. On the other hand, she liked having money she could spend any way she pleased. Big Mike complained:

"It's just not normal, Sarah. The boy should be out playing."

So his parents insisted he take two weeks off to go to Boy Scout camp. Big Mike said that by the time Mikus returned it would be time for school to start, and the boy would forget the cleaning business. But the business would not forget the boy. During the two weeks Mikus was gone, Sarah answered calls all day long. Her son returned to a stack of messages. School began and Mikus continued washing windows late afternoons and on weekends. When he had more orders than he had time, he hired two friends to help. By his sixteenth birthday, he had a staff of twelve workers and had saved $20,000. He seldom picked up a Squeegie anymore. Managing his staff required all his time.

When he was about to graduate he told his parents he wanted to go to the state university in the fall. "What for?" his father asked. "People go to college so they can make a lot of money when they get out. You already make more than anybody I know."

Mikus said he wanted to study literature. He thought he would like to be a writer.

"You'll have to pay for it yourself." said his father.

Mikus had a plan. He explained it to Big Mike. College enrollment in 1968 had hit an all time high. Insufficient dormitory space plagued every school in the country. Papers and magazines were full of stories about overcrowded campuses. Mikus planned to use his $20,000 to buy a house and rent rooms to students. That way he had a room for himself and sufficient income to cover tuition and living expenses. As a property owner he would get numerous tax breaks including tax deductible trips home for consulting purposes. And as the working manager of his business, he could deduct some of his

educational expenses. When he graduated he would sell the house to someone else, and if he were lucky, make a profit.

Big Mike said it sounded crazy. He consulted an accountant without telling his son. The accountant called the plan brilliant. He offered to buy the house from Mikus in four years when his own daughter would be ready for college. Big Mike knew he should be proud of his son, but somehow the rental scheme irritated him. He had been unable to afford college himself, even with the GI bill. Once again , Mikus got what he wanted without asking his parents for help. In his mind he heard the boy criticize him as a drudge and a no account.

In the small town where the state university is located, Mikus found a rundown Victorian mansion on a hill overlooking the river. The realty company, after some haggling, sold it to him for less than the asking price, since he paid cash. One of the students who called about a room was a tall and willowy coed named Nancy. She had little money, but she did have a skill Mikus could use. She was a journeyman carpenter planning to major in vocational education. Mikus offered her a room in exchange for 10 hours of work a week.

Over the next four years they replaced doors, painted, laid new floors, added five bathrooms, and turned the decrepit old family home into the showplace it had been 100 years earlier. Every semester Mikus raised the rent. Still he had a two year waiting list. Everybody on campus wanted to live in the Old Mansion.

Only one cloud marred Mikus' bright sky. His worst grades were in his major. Alas, young Mikus did not write well, a serious flaw in an English major. For the gods distribute birth gifts unevenly. Some people get perfect pitch, some the ability to throw a football, and some, like Mikus, are allowed to make money while they think of something else. It is also a given, that most feel their gifts are tin, while others received gold and silver.

Mikus wanted to write perfect prose. He wanted to make people laugh and cry. He wanted to pen that one crystal phrase in which mankind would see, once and forever, the explanation of the unexplainable. This was not to be. His instructors complained that his papers were convoluted and difficult to read. Somehow he used many words to say what other people said in a few. He told himself it was because he was more intelligent than his fellow students. He saw implications that required clarification. He saw possibilities that had to be eliminated. His professors did not comprehend the depth and density of his ideas, and that was their failing, not his. Someday it would come together and he would create art.

Mikus and Nancy fell in love. They were not sure when it happened, somewhere between fixing the clogged drain in the front bath and replacing the entryway floor, they thought. They were married in the living room of their re-created house two days before graduation.

Though Mikus intended to sell the house to his father's accountant or another student, the best offer he received came from an exclusive restaurant chain that operated out of historic homes. He gladly accepted their bid of nearly four times what he paid for the purchase and restoration. He and Nancy honeymooned for a month in Hawaii.

Nancy had a job that fall as vocational education teacher in Arcadia. "What will you do, Mikus?" friends and relatives asked. "I'm going to stay at home and write," Mikus said.

They bought a big old house and began fixing it up. Mikus purchased a typewriter and sent out "how to" articles on home repair. He sold one or two, although the editors complained that his writing lacked clarity. When the articles appeared he could hardly recognize them as his own.

"Why do you want to be a writer?" Nancy asked him. "You're good at so many other things."

"I just do," Mikus said. "I'll keep doing it and doing it, and eventually I'll get good at it."

Every morning Nancy went off to her teaching job and Mikus sat down at his typewriter. Articles and stories departed with the mail only to return six weeks later with a printed rejection slip clipped to the cover page. Mikus learned to recognize, all the way from his workroom, the distinctive thump of a manuscript deposited in the mailbox. He cringed each time he heard it.

Keeping the house orderly and good food on the table was Mikus' solace. He discovered he liked housework. When all the clutter was removed, the furniture dusted and the rugs vacuumed, he felt omnipotent, a creator of order from chaos. He was his own household god.

Sometimes when he had finished writing for the day, he walked over to the park just to be with other people for awhile. A group of mothers gathered there most afternoons to watch their children play on the swings. Before long he knew the names of the women and their children. They were fascinated by his career as a house husband. It was the mid-70s and most of the women were trying to break into the work force, either full or part-time. Housework was the major stumbling block, they complained. Their husbands refused to help. How could they find the time to find themselves?

"I kind of like housework," Mikus said.

"Oh please. Come and do mine," said three women at once.

"Okay," Mikus said, "I will." And before he knew what was happening he had three or four cleaning jobs.

He had an advantage few women possessed. No one had taught him to clean, so his mind was open. He contacted a successful Janitorial Service and asked if he could study their methods. He did some reading. He found shortcuts. The telephone rang constantly:

"Mikus, you are wonderful. Would you consider divorcing your wife and marrying me?"

"Do you have Monday free?"

"Could you come on Thursday?"

He doubled his prices and still the calls came in. One day Mikus looked at his calendar and realized he had done no writing for the last month. "This just won't do," he said, "I've got to get some help." He called the local community college to see if their job placement office could provide students. "I'd rather have boys," he said. "They have no preconceived ideas about cleaning." Soon he had a staff to manage. The profits astounded him. He raised the wages of his best workers and offered them flexible hours that did not interfere with their studies. He named his business "The Golden Mop."

Housewives attempted to seduce his young workers, who were often not reluctant. The temptation presented by a good looking young man in the house was overwhelming. He knew some of his employees collected tips for services other than cleaning, and he

warned them against it. Still, that was their business. His business grew and grew. He seldom sat down at the typewriter anymore.

He read up on investments and began pouring extra money into carefully selected stocks. The first year he doubled his profits. The second year, he lost some money, but the third year made him a millionaire.

"If only I had made this money writing," he said to Nancy one night.

"You made it honestly. What's the difference?"

"I want to be a successful writer. That's the difference. Other things just keep getting in the way."

One day an investor called Mikus. He wanted to buy The Golden Mop name and methods and expand the service throughout the state. Mikus did not really want to sell, so he set a price ridiculously high. Two days later an attorney in a limousine delivered a notarized offer for the exorbitant amount Mikus had named.

He had outsmarted himself. He had to sell.

"Now you can get back to writing," Nancy suggested to the crestfallen Mikus.

"Yes," Mikus agreed, a smile spreading across his face. "Neither one of us ever has to work again." They took a second honeymoon in Alaska. When they returned Mikus bought a computer and began writing a novel. It was wonderful the way the ideas came to him, almost as if they were planted in his brain by someone else. This must be talent, he thought. I always knew I had it. The hours slipped away as his fingers flew across the keyboard. He never re-wrote. Sometimes it was three in the afternoon before he broke for lunch. He read biographies of writers, all of whom complained bitterly of writers' block and the mindbending slavery of re-writing. Mikus found it odd. Writing came so easily to him. It flowed from his fingers.

After a semester at home, Nancy pled boredom and went back to teaching. Mikus invested her salary and doubled it in a short time. They hired a tax attorney and a financial advisor to handle their business affairs.

Once again Mikus was free to walk to Arcadia Park each afternoon, but few of the old group still came. Children were in school and most of the women now had jobs. Mikus missed them.

The one person he recognized from years past was another writer, a newspaper columnist, who called herself Summer Afternoon. Her little girl, Penny, had grown up and gone away to school, but Summer still came to the park afternoons out of habit. Summer wrote a syndicated column about gardening, which Mikus did not really consider writing. Still, she made a living with what she wrote, which was more than he could say. He asked her to look at his unfinished novel and tell him what she thought. He knew she would be impressed.

"Thanks for asking me, Mikus," she said, "but I'd really rather not. I learned a long time ago that commenting on friends' writing is a good way to lose friends."

A week later he asked her again to look at his manuscript and she changed the subject. The third time he asked, he begged. He found, to his surprise, that he really wanted her approval.

"All right, I'll read it, but I'll tell you the truth, Mikus. I'm not a diplomat . I'm extremely critical of my writing and I don't know how to be different with anyone else's."

"Good," he said. "I want to know what you really think."

The next week Mikus did no writing. He spent most of his time thinking about Summer reading his book. He pictured her smiling to herself and saying "this guy is really good." One morning she called him and said she had finished reading and would meet him in the park. He was excited as a kid on his birthday.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, as she sat down next to him on a bench. Leaves from the tree above them drifted down, one of them settling on the package that contained his manuscript. She blew it away and handed him the pages.

"It needs work, Mikus, lots of work. The characters all seem the same. I can't keep them straight. What's more I don't really care what happens to them. There's no conflict - just nice people going around being nice. This does not a story make."

"They're not all alike. One of them is black." He was irate. He had not suspected her of being so dense.

"Then show me. What makes the black experience different from the experience of the other characters? How does it affect his personality, his speech, his feelings about himself? Make him a product of the things that have happened to him. You tell me he's black, but I don't feel it from what you write."

Mikus picked up the manuscript and stood up. "Thank you for your comments," he said. "I'll give them all the consideration they deserve."

As he walked away, Summer said to his back, "I told you I'm not a diplomat."

It was two weeks before Mikus was able to get back to work again. During that period he wrote several letters to Summer telling her how misguided her criticism was. Then he threw them out. Finally he decided the best revenge was success and he returned to work with an iron will. She is probably just jealous, he thought. After all, she doesn't do creative work. She just writes a newspaper column.

A month later the book was done. Mikus bought a manuscript box and sent it off to a publisher with a six page cover letter explaining how he had always wanted to be a writer. He began preparing amusing remarks for his interview on the Today show.

In a month the book returned with a letter:

"Dear Contributor,

Our staff has carefully evaluated your submission. We are sorry to inform you that it does not suit our needs at the present time.

Thank you for thinking of Inbrook Press."

He bought more boxes and sent out three more copies. All came back with three or four line rejection letters. One didn't even have a letter. On the front page an editor had stuck a tiny yellow note that said, "No thanks."

Mikus decided he needed an agent, so he wrote to fifteen of them. Three agreed to look at his book. Unlike the editors, who told him nothing, the agents were brutal:

"This has no merit whatsoever."

"The characters are dull and the plot is implausible."

"Put in a few years learning your craft, then try us again."

Mikus was crushed. Life lost its purpose and meaning. He quit dressing and spent the day in his bathrobe. He stared out the windows for hours at a time. He grew pale and thin.

"Mikus," Nancy asked, "are you sure you want to write or do you just want to be a writer?"

"What's the difference?"

"You write. You write all the time. I think your problem is that you want other people to see you as a writer."

"I think you should stick to teaching teenagers carpentry, which is what you know about."

The atmosphere in the house was decidedly frosty for the next day or two.

I just need someone to say something kind about my book, Mikus decided. If just one person liked it, I could find the enthusiasm to keep working. Then he got to thinking. Are there other writers out there who need a kind word or two? Would they be willing to pay for it? If so, how much?

He bought a writers' magazine and looked up their advertising rates. Then he composed an ad and sent it off to the two major magazines. The ad said:

"English major and unpublished writer will tell you what is good about your manuscript. I have no publishing credentials, but I love to read. I will tell you what I like about your novel or short story. Guaranteed: no negative comments. $3 per page."

After he sent the ad off, he felt foolish. No one in their right mind would pay him to read their story, not when they could hire a professional. But the cost of the advertising was minimal and Mikus had more money than he needed anyway. Besides, it beat staring out the window.

Over the next few weeks he forgot about the ad. A new idea for a story came to him and getting it on paper absorbed all his time. Then one morning he got a call from the Arcadia post master:

"Mr. King, would you please come in here and check your post office box. You have 15 parcels. This is a small office. We don't have room to store packages."

Mikus picked them up immediately. What a curious collection. One was written by hand on yellow legal sheets. Another was in hanging folders thrown into a big Depends carton. The stories were truly awful, worse than he could have imagined, but reading them lifted his spirits. I may be bad, he thought, but I'm not this bad. He found something good to say about each one:

"Allow me to compliment you on your spelling and punctuation. There is not a single error in this story."

"I enjoyed reading your descriptions, especially the five page one in Chapter Twelve where you talk about the sun dropping into the ocean. Also, the details of the characters' clothing were really interesting. I never knew what a fesque was before.

"I think your point, that people should be kind to each other, is well taken. I enjoyed your story about the white dog and the black cat getting along so well together with no thought of the difference in color. Sometimes we need to be reminded of simple things."

He put the checks in a pile on his desk. When he finished reading the last of the manuscripts he counted the take, "$1,009.00. It had taken him a week to read the offerings and write a short complimentary letter. I hope I am not being condescending, he thought. Maybe all these people will write and demand their money back.

Several did reply, but only to thank him for his kind remarks.

"Your service is worth twice what you charge," one woman wrote. "I did so need a kind word from someone." Every day more manuscripts came. Once again his business grew beyond his ability to cope. He called the English teacher at Arcadia High and asked if she would like to earn extra money reading manuscripts. She was delighted. The

following month he hired two more readers. The only thing they had to do, he explained, was find something complimentary to say about the manuscripts.

"Mikus, you need a tax shelter. Your income is going through the roof," his accountant complained.

"I'll find something," Mikus said. He spent an afternoon at the library reading about new enterprises needing funding. He chose as most likely to lose money a scheme by a sailboat pilot to start a 24 hour news channel on cable television. No one wants to watch news all day and night, he reasoned. And he was right. Cable news was an excellent write off for a few years. Of course, ten years down the road Ted Turner's CNN News would catch hold and Mikus' stock would make him another fortune.

For the moment, however, Mikus had no way of knowing what would happen to his investment. His major concern was finding a place to put the manuscripts that arrived by the dozen.

"Well, Mikus, you've done it again," Nancy said one afternoon. She stood in the doorway of his workroom looking at the stacks of cartons and manuscript boxes. "What happens now to your own stories?"

Mikus looked up from between two stacks of paper that reached higher than his head. "I'll get back to it, Nancy. In a few months, I'll get back to it."