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CLOSE-UP: TONY ELLSWORTH

## Quality not quantity: Craftsmanship wins kudos, clients for Ramona bike maker

By JEN LEBRON KUHNEY

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For a few thousand dollars, Tony Ellsworth can build clients Truth.

If they don't want that, they can opt for Epiphany or perhaps a Moment. He can build those, too.

In a building tucked into the winding hills of Ramona that looks more like a tract home than a warehouse, Ellsworth has his headquarters for **Ellsworth Handcrafted Bicycles**.

There's no clear front door to the building, but a door next to the garage leads visitors into a warehouse full of hundreds of bicycle frames sorted by type and color.

Truths, Moments and Epiphanies are hung from stands made of raw wood and PVC pipe.

World and national champion cyclists ride Ellsworth's high-quality lines like Truth, Epiphany and Coercion.



Ellsworth

The frames alone are priced at \$2,000 or more, with a full bike costing upwards of \$10,000.

But for true cyclists, the money is worth it.

Riders swear by their "Ells" frames on mountain biking online forums.

During better economic times, the company did better, but Ellsworth said the Ellsworth Handcrafted Bicycles faithful have still been purchasing bikes this year -- just not at the same pace they once did.

Not that Ellsworth has ever sold bikes on the same scale as **Huffy, Fisher** or **Giant**.

In fact, when Ellsworth first set out building bicycles, the plan wasn't to sell them at all.

### First love

Ellsworth fell in love with cycling at an early age.

"I've been an addict since I was a kid," he said. "It's in my blood."

After learning to ride, his world expanded beyond his block. Soon, he was venturing a few more streets down the road and soon, he was traversing the neighborhood.

Even as a little kid Ellsworth recognized something he would carry with him into adulthood: Bikes are freedom.

Unlike cars or other vehicles, riders don't have to rely on gas and they get the opportunity to cover terrain most people would never be able to see if traveling by car or foot.

Ellsworth took a hiatus from riding through middle and high school, but returned to his first love in his early 20s.

Biking and cycling gave Ellsworth the opportunity to escape from the daily grind of his career as a 401(k)

planner.

But there was a small problem with the mountain bikes Ellsworth rode. They just didn't feel as good to ride as high-end road bikes.

While complaining about this one day, a friend of Ellsworth's half-jokingly challenged him to build a bike of his own if he wasn't happy with what he had.

Ellsworth, a political science and internal relations major, took it as a dare.

He created his first frame design and took it to a machinist in 1991.

The one bike became two, one for him and one for his now ex-wife. Soon friends saw how well the frames were performing and wanted ones of their own.

He made another batch of 10.

Ellsworth's first true production run was 30 models of what would eventually evolve into the Truth.

The blue number 27 of that first run still hangs Ellsworth's Ramona headquarters.

"All my friends wanted one," he said. "But making bikes for your buddies and your buddies' buddies gets expensive."

Ellsworth used to charge his friends just the costs in materials, and soon his little hobby turned into \$60,000-worth of projects.

He then decided to turn that hobby into a career.

In 1999, Ellsworth sold his 401(k) business and started making bikes full-time with his younger brother Mike Mulder.

After five years, Mulder eventually left Ellsworth and created **Beyond Bikes**, the self-proclaimed "Web's largest bicycle store."

Over the next few years, Ellsworth's company would grow.

For those who are not the knowledgeable about cycling, it would seem one all-purpose bike would be enough.

According to Ellsworth, the perfect number of bicycles is "n plus one," or the number of bicycles one already owns and then one more.

Currently, Ellsworth offers over a dozen different bicycles, each with a specific purpose.

While the company started out with mountain bikes for various purposes, it now offers a beach cruiser and a tandem bike as well.

"Each (model) is the top of their game for the type it is," Ellsworth said.

Ellsworth taught himself how to use 3-D rendering software to build better bikes, and said he is constantly tinkering with current models to improve them.

Every new piece of every bike is put on a scale and tested to ensure the lowest weight possible.

When he first set out, he wasn't always thinking about the smallest screws and joints, but over time he has honed each individual piece for optimization.

The value and quality of one of Ellsworth's bikes was most recently recognized by major mountain-bike Web site singletracks.com when the Moment model won the distinction of "Best All-Mountain" bicycle.

Aside from his bikes being recognized by the mountain biking community, actors like Robin Williams, Beverley Mitchell and Liam Neeson have hopped on the Ellsworth bandwagon as well.

While Ellsworth said positive reviews and word of mouth have carried the company so far, he is trying to find a

marketing manager to ramp up the Ellsworth name throughout the country.

Ellsworth might not get to the scale of Huffy, Fisher or Giant, but he will continue to make the bikes he thinks are the best in the world.

And that's the Truth.