

Steve Schussler's on a roll again, and superlatives are everywhere

doug grow columnist



Exclamation points bounced off the walls when Steve Schussler, concept guy, greeted Paul Ridgeway, promotions guy.

"You look great!" Schussler said to Ridgeway.

"You, too!!" said Ridgeway. "Just fantastic!!!" said Schussler. "I've lost 40 pounds!!!" said Ridgeway. "Fabulous!!!" said Schussler. "Have a muffin!" "Great!!!" said Ridgeway.

Their voices grew louder. The room shriveled. "Wows!" tumbled from the sky.

These appear to be joyful days for Schussler, the man who had it, lost it all and now is on a roll again. Ridgeway was one of the few people who stuck with him through good times and bad.

Schussler's playground/lab/headquarters is in a nondescript Golden Valley building. "Schussler Creative, Inc." reads the sign over

the door. On the door, there's this message: "Inventions, Ideas, Contraptions and Dreams."

"What's inside is 10 times anything you can imagine!!!" says Ridgeway.

Stunningly, given the source, it's an understatement.

Inside, Schussler's dreams come to life. They are multimillion dollar restaurant/retail/theme park/museum dreams.

Schussler was the creator of Juke-Box Saturday Night, a nightclub that wowed downtown Minneapolis in the 1980s and early '90s. JukeBox was the club with the King Kong climbing up the side, a '57 Chevy roaring out the front of the building and lines of people waiting to get in.

The good times didn't last. In 1992,

Schussler, once the king of downtown, was bankrupt. He sold his building to St. Paul's X-rated Hafiz brothers and disappeared to his suburban home. He had nothing, except a vision of an eatery set in a rain forest.

But it wasn't easy. Schussler filled his house with jungle birds and waterfalls and invited potential investors to see this wild restaurant plan.

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Steve Schussler's on a roll; superlatives abound

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"Every month they were shutting off my power and my water," he said. "I'd go down to the power company and say, 'You gotta turn the power back on or you'll kill my birds!' It was embarrassing."

In the hard times, Ridgeway tried to comfort Schussler.

"You're just a couple of feet from the top of the mountain!" Ridgeway would say. "Don't give up!!"

Schussler didn't give up. Investors finally shared his vision. The Rainforest Cafe moved into the Mall of America in 1994. It was a hit. It went public and expanded. Schussler got out with money and time to dream.

Last week, he opened a door inside his headquarters.

"You're not going to be in Golden Valley anymore!" said Ridgeway.

Indeed. Ahead were 10,000 square feet of moving dinosaurs and fire and ice.

It's his newest cafe concept, T-Rex. Schussler brought ex-



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Paul Ridgeway and Steve Schussler were exuding optimism.

ecutives from Landry's Inc. of Houston to this warehouse to see it. They were dazzled.

The first T-Rex Restaurant — and so much more — will open this month in Kansas City. Another is to open in Disney World. And then ... Who knows?

Schussler maintains a 20 percent interest in T-Rex.

There will be dinosaurs. And

archaeological sites, where kids dig up real fossils as their parents dine in peace. And lots of things to sell. T-shirts. Stuffed dinosaurs. Key chains. Sheets and pillowcases.

There are more doors in the Golden Valley warehouse. One leads to a room filled with 300-year-old Chinese artworks. These are the real deal. life-size ivory soldiers and hors-

es, bought from a U.S. collector and put back together from millions of pieces by one of Schussler's employees. Wouldn't they be perfect for a classy Chinese restaurant in Vegas? Schussler asks.

There are doors to a jazz club concept; a hot dog hall of fame concept. And that's just a start.

Schussler, sounding like a carny barker, talks louder and faster as he walks through this vast play land. Sweat begins to drip. His arms wave faster.

"Wouldn't it be something if a kid grows up to become a famous archaeologist because of an experience he had at T-Rex?!" he says.

"Yes!" exclaims Ridgeway.

Schussler again: "Wouldn't it be something if some child becomes the next Picasso because of something that happened at one of my restaurants?!"

Ridgeway shouts: "Show some passion!! Show some passion!!!"

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