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# MINNESOTA BUSINESS

DECEMBER 2006

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# Stream of Consciousness

**Steve Schussler**, the mastermind behind **Rainforest Café**, unleashes his imagination and wows Walt Disney World with his new dinosaur-themed restaurant.

**Can his next burst of creativity keep investors intrigued?**

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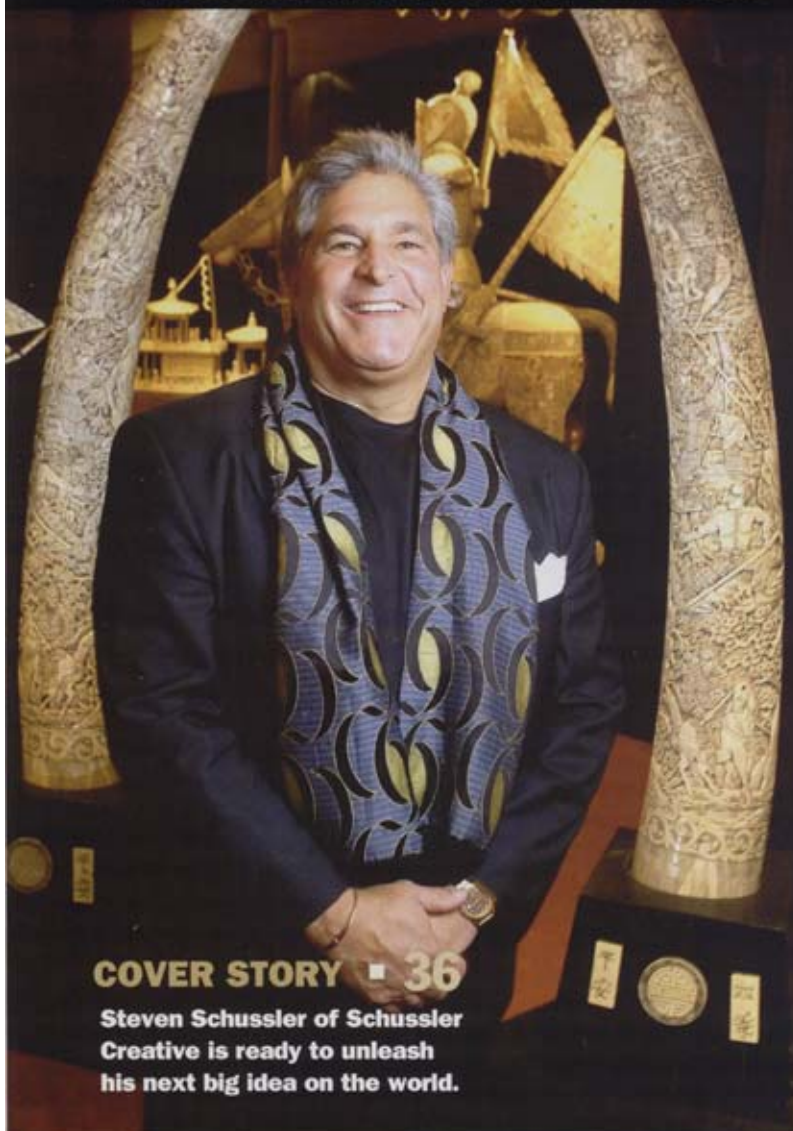
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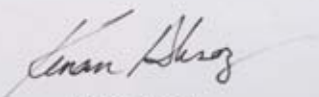


I've never met anyone quite like Steven Schussler. During the 15 years that I've published *MinnesotaBusiness Magazine* I've met many entrepreneurs, yet none with such an incredible creative streak. Sure, I knew that the man behind a concept as creative as Rainforest Café would be imaginative, energetic and full of life, but these words don't begin to describe Steven Schussler. Stepping inside his Golden Valley warehouse is like visiting a mini Disneyland. Everywhere you turn, you see things that make your jaw drop and you can't help but wonder what the purpose is behind the larger-than-life statues, outlandish inventions and animatronics.

I can guarantee you, however, that Steven knows exactly what the purpose is behind each of his inventions, and people throughout the U.S. will soon know too. The residents of Kansas City know, since this is the site of the very first T-Rex restaurant. And the folks at Disney World know, because they visited his warehouse recently and signed a deal to place a T-Rex restaurant in Disney World by 2008. Read our cover story on Steven on page 38 and you'll know as well.

Creativity also came into play when Greg Peterson of Peters Billiards found out from the city that the new I-35W/62 Crosstown Commons Reconstruction would go right through his building. Greg turned this adversity into opportunity and rebuilt a brand new \$4 million home entertainment store just 27 feet to the west. Read how Greg turned a bit of bad news into one of the largest game room stores in the country on page 30.

As we move into 2007, we're taking *MinnesotaBusiness Magazine* in an exciting, new direction, with a revamped look and new departments and features. Once you look over the January issue, drop me a line and let me know what you think.

  
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# Stream of Consciousness

Steve Schussler, the mastermind behind Rainforest Café, unleashes his imagination and wows Walt Disney World with his new dinosaur-themed restaurant. Can his next burst of creativity keep investors intrigued? By Elizabeth Millard Photos by Todd Buchanan

**O**n a weekday afternoon, right around the time most people ponder whether sugar or caffeine will get them through the workaday slump, Steve Schussler rounds the corner like he's being chased.

"Hi," he says, brightly, with more energy than a whole Starbucks can provide. "Water-coffee-juice-phone-bathroom-desk...what do you need?" A handshake lasts more than thirty seconds, and he seems reluctant to let go, but also hesitant to stop moving.

That welcoming vigor, combined with an almost relentless momentum, explains much about how Schussler does business. As creator of the Rainforest Café and head of Schussler Creative, he is the center point of a thriving enterprise, and even though the offices are housed in a lackluster block of buildings, the energy inside almost crackles.

It's that drive and enthusiasm that has done more than spark a jungle-and-bird-themed restaurant, too. Already on to his next batch of ideas, Schussler has had a team from Walt Disney World fly in to see his prototypes, and his dinosaur-centered restaurant concept, T-Rex, opened in its first location last summer and

should go nationwide before long.

"When I proposed Rainforest, people were laughing and saying it would never work," Schussler says. "You have to be strong-willed to overcome negative sentiment, and that's what happened. Now we have 45 stores. But with T-Rex, I don't think there'll be any laughing."

## Man About Town

Schussler's office is like a glimpse inside the mind of the man himself. Its walls, about 12-feet high, have barely any space left from the news clippings, signed photos, awards and even a framed T-shirt from a half-marathon that Schussler ran nearly 10 years ago. His desk, oversized and stretching from one end of the large room to the other, has Harley Davidson memorabilia, Disney figures, papers, magazines, bottles of hot sauce, and somewhere, glowing in the middle, an actual computer.

Although some of the framed articles contain comparisons of him to Willy Wonka or Peter Pan, Schussler is no reclusive inventor or perennial boy stuck in Neverland—this is a bagel-loving, New York-born, loud-talking East Coast dynamo who will likely never shake that twinge of an accent

## Schussler Creative

**Headquarters:** Golden Valley

**Inception:** 2000

**Revenue:** \$20 million in 2006 (projected)

**Employees:** 11

**Description:** Creator of restaurant concepts, hospitality venues and attractions.

**Web site:** [www.schusslercreative.com](http://www.schusslercreative.com)

## Leadership & Governance

### MANAGEMENT TEAM:

**Steve Schussler**, founder, chairman of the board  
**Helmut Lange**, senior vice president of retail  
**Jeff Bornmann**, vice president of construction

## Leader Profile

**Name:** Steven Schussler

**Title:** founder, chairman of the board

**Age:** 51

**Hometown:** New York, NY

**Education:** Miami Dade Community College

**First Job:** Paperboy, age 8

**Family:** Unmarried, no children

no matter how long he lives in the heartland. His brain moves faster than pedestrians in Manhattan, and even his Bentley parked outside is at a jaunty angle, as if he didn't have time to park it carefully.

The son of an artist mother and a salesman father, Schussler jokes that no one can keep up with him, since he still walks at a New York pace, and it's easy to think of the comment as figurative as well as literal. As soon as he thinks of an idea, he shouts from his office to a specific employee, and moves on to the next thought.

It seems as if such an energetic entrepreneur wouldn't want to leave the pace of the East Coast, or at least move closer to his potential new giant customer, Disney. But Schussler wouldn't live anywhere else.

As the owner of a chain of nightclub restaurants called Jukebox Saturday Night in the 1990s, Schussler found himself visiting the Minneapolis location the most often, even though there were other locations in the country. Growing up in racially and culturally diverse New York, he liked watching the Metro area's growth in the arts and its influx of immigrants from Asia and Africa. Of course, the outdoor life didn't hurt either.

"Steve is extremely creative, and comes up with a lot of good ideas, but one thing that really sets him apart is that when he goes looking for financial backing for his ideas, he doesn't stop until he finds somebody."

—Lyle Berman, famous poker player

"People ask me, 'why not go to Orlando?' or 'Why not go out to Los Angeles?'" Schussler says. "But Minnesota is so unique, the people here are amazing. And the quality of life is really second to none. It sounds cliché, but I can go water-skiing, horseback riding and hiking in the same day. I think if you could eliminate deep winter, the population here would explode."

## Building a Business

Once in Minnesota, Schussler began to create a Rainforest Café prototype, after being inspired by his tropical birds. But he didn't play around with small dioramas or blueprints—instead he turned his house into a jungle paradise.

After painting the walls and ceilings black, he turned every room into a rainforest scene, complete with 40 tropical birds, two tortoises, an iguana and a baby baboon named Charlie. Saltwater fish meandered in twelve 150-gallon tanks, and vines and foliage hung everywhere. A particularly notable touch was a 35-foot rock waterfall that

emptied into a river snaking through the house and ending in the yard. Hundreds of thousands of dollars went into the effort, even though Schussler didn't have a single investor.

At one point, DEA agents raided the house, because Schussler had the largest single-residence electric bill in the state, and they were convinced he was growing marijuana. Once they realized their mistake, several of the agents came back and brought their kids, Schussler says.

But despite flashing his trademark high-wattage smile whenever people would visit, there were numerous moments of doubt, Schussler confides. "I'd go to bed almost every night and cry," he says. "I thought I might be crazy. I didn't know why I was doing it. I just knew it was a great idea, and I couldn't let it go."

Schussler hadn't created a prototype like Rainforest before, but his background provides some evidence as to why he kept going—he's the type that finds a way, no matter what, once an idea seems sound. As a teenager, he used to hitchhike to NY Jets games to sell hot chocolate so that he could watch quarterback Joe Namath play football. Later he became a bricklayer, and then began selling commercial time in TV and radio broadcasting because he was amused by the thought of something as intangible as selling "air."

Of course, he got that job not by simply sending out resumes, but actually dressing in a Superman suit, putting himself in a crate for delivery, and popping out when the station manager appeared, calling himself a "supersalesman." So, building a rainforest in his living room wasn't exactly a large leap for someone fond of offbeat concepts.

Although he struggled with whether he was doing the right thing in decking out his house, Schussler's father was sold on the idea, and determined to help his son get some financial backing. In 1992, the elder Schussler slipped through security at the World Series of Poker and sat down in the seat of Lyle Berman, the famous poker maverick who kick-started fresh interest in the game. Berman remembers that Schussler pulled a fifty dollar bill from his pocket,



which appealed both to Berman's sense of humor and entrepreneurial side, and insisted that the poker giant see his son's house.

Although Berman didn't take the money, he did make the visit. Then he turned Schussler down. But, intrigued, he kept coming back with family members and friends, and finally after two years called up some business partners and agreed to fund the concept. Part of what won him over was Schussler's persistence, which Berman—a notoriously focused and persistent man himself—found impressive.

"Steve is extremely creative, and comes up with a lot of good ideas, but one thing that really sets him apart is that when he goes looking for financial backing for his ideas, he doesn't stop until he finds somebody," Berman says, recalling the numerous phone calls he received from Schussler even when he kept saying "no, thanks."

Schussler's drive to keep his brain popping with new ideas was what launched Rainforest, but in many ways, it's also what drove him to sell that part of the business. A partner, who worried that his other concepts would cause stockholders to flinch, advised him to keep his focus in one area. That advice is, roughly, like getting a kid to sit still on the ride to Valleyfair.

"I couldn't just stop having ideas," Schussler says. "You can't just try to push a thought out of your head, and besides, I was thinking of a doozy."

## The Dino Biz

The prototype for the "doozy" is on the other side of a somewhat plain door at Schussler Creative, the type of entryway that looks as if it leads to a loading dock. In this case, it leads to dinosaurs.

Called T-Rex, the concept is classic pull-out-all-the-stops Schussler, with animatronic figures that loom over a wood-chip-strewn pathway, complete with ferns, fog, flickering lights that look like fire and a sound system that pipes in dinosaur roars. Past the gauntlet of beasts is a wealth of sand where kids can dig for actual fossils that have been shipped in from Morocco. Or visitors can peruse one of three gift shop prototypes, each more impressive than the next, and chock-full of every dino- and Stone Age-themed product imaginable, from mineral earrings to T-Rex pajamas.

The first T-Rex, complete with menu items like "Layers of Earth Lasagna" and "Chicken Caesarsaurus," opened last summer in Kansas City, Kan., as a joint venture between Schussler Creative and Landry's Restaurants, a firm that operates more than 300 dining, hospitality and entertainment companies like Joe's Crab Shack and the Golden Nugget casino. Landry's is also the owner of the Rainforest Café.

Bringing in Landry's rather than having the restaurant run solely by Schussler Creative wasn't surprising, says Berman. "Steve understands his strengths and weaknesses," he notes. "He doesn't waste time trying to be what he's not. He loves creating concepts, not necessarily managing and running them as businesses, so he pairs up with people who are great at that. Partnering with Landry's is a good marriage."



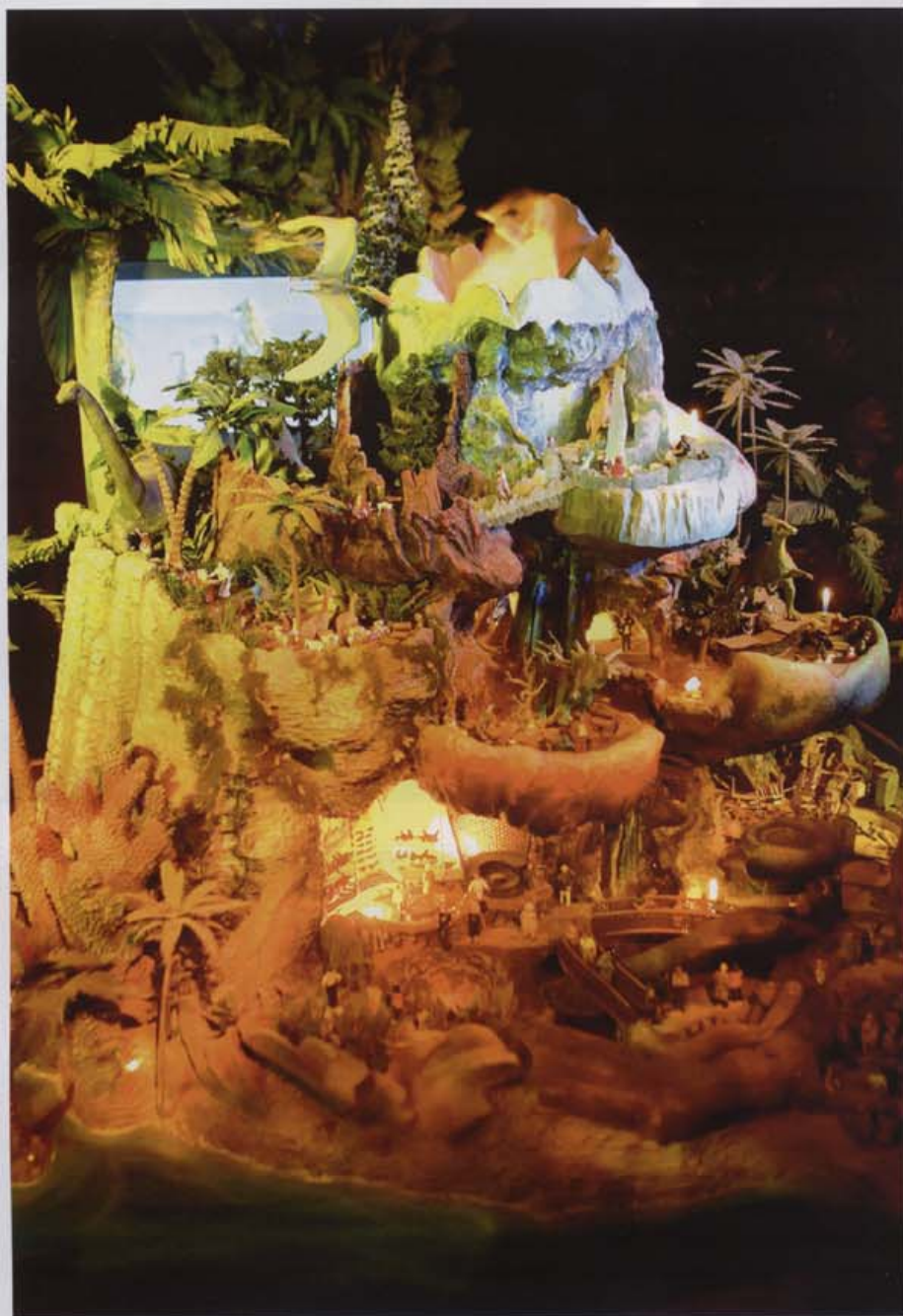
Schussler's next bright idea centers on these statues from the 19th century Qing dynasty. Each statue had to be painstakingly reassembled from tiny bone and ivory fragments.

Despite some initial "bumps in the road" to make sure financial incentives were in place, the restaurant is fast becoming a popular favorite, according to Joe Reardon, mayor of Kansas City. "Steve is extremely creative, but also extremely driven," he says. "Having those two qualities together is what makes working with him so special. When you see a creation like T-Rex, you very much understand Steve and his energy."

The ultimate T-Rex restaurant, modeled after the actual T-Rex restaurant in Kansas, is much more elaborate, although currently about two feet tall and sits as a model at the quieter end of dinosaur alley at Schussler Creative. With little flickering candles that represent bonfires, the model looks like the ultimate science fair project, if a kid was actually interested in building a four-level restaurant that includes a huge movie screen, a room made of ice, fog drifting under tables and an enormous fire pit. But this model, and the animatronic dinosaurs, was enough to convince representatives from Walt Disney World to buy in on the concept during their recent visit, and a version of T-Rex will be built at Walt Disney World in 2008.

One revenue-generating area of Schussler's concepts, and one of the most notable aspects of the Rainforest Café, is its retail area. T-





Modeled after the actual T-Rex restaurant in Kansas, this small-scale version features a huge movie screen, a room made of ice, fog drifting under tables and an enormous fire pit. This version of T-Rex will open in Walt Disney World in 2008.

getting an adoption certificate. The Build-A-Dino line is already exceeding expectations, says Maxine Clark, Build-A-Bear's founder and "Chief Executive Bear."

"Schussler Creative contacted us several years ago when they were developing T-Rex," she says. "They wanted it to be the absolute best it could be. Steve is a great partner. I get to work with a lot of smart people, but he's smart and creative and fun."

## Concept King

As overwhelming as T-Rex might be in its Golden Valley prototype, it's certainly not Schussler's only idea, and his next big concept is housed just on the other side of the paleo-zone in a warehouse space decked out in chandeliers, silk draperies and dreamy images of Asia. This concept is centered on a room-full of bone and ivory statues from the 19th century Qing dynasty in China. The elaborate, carved images, many larger than life, are impressive enough, but the fact that they're whole is even more remarkable, given that most were broken into thousands of tiny fragments and painstakingly re-assembled.

The room is the one area where Schussler is quiet, and actually whispers for a moment, as if he's going to awake the sword-carrying soldiers or set one of the formidable model ships off to sea. "Cool, huh?" he says. "Ever see anything like this? It's going to blow people away."

The chain that would house the figures isn't yet named, and it would be small, perhaps only two or three restaurants. Schussler envisions a white tablecloth, soft

Rex will also have a retail area with an extensive array of products, thanks to Helmut Lange, Schussler Creative's senior vice president of retail. "People want a memento of their experience," says Lange. "But more than that, they want to feel connected emotionally. These products evoke a memory."

They're also more educationally focused than those found at Rainforest, he adds. The "dig zone" that's part of the T-Rex concept is

designed to get kids interested in paleontology, not just provide something to play in until their bronto burgers arrive.

In building up its retail focus, Schussler has been exploring more partnerships, and a notable example with T-Rex is the creation of Build-A-Dino, a line of stuffed dinosaurs that follow the same process as Build-A-Bear. A child can choose a dinosaur shape, outfit, and put a little "heart" into it before





## Corporate Timeline

**1979** — Schussler starts JukeBox Saturday Night, a chain of restaurants with 1950s and 1960s décor, as well as Design Concept Studio and JSBN, a provider of interior designs and theme parties.

**1986** — Schussler named one of the top 100 entrepreneurs in the country by *Entrepreneur Magazine*.

**1990** — After closing his JukeBox Saturday Night chain, Schussler builds a prototype of the Rainforest Café in his St. Louis Park home.

**1994** — The first Rainforest Café opens in the Mall of America as a joint venture between Schussler and Lyle Berman, the poker impresario.

**1995** — Rainforest Café completes its initial public offering.

**1997** — Rainforest Café is chosen as Retailer of the Year by the National Retail Federation.

**1998** — Schussler Creative is named one of the 100 fastest growing companies in the country by *Fortune Magazine*.

**2000** — Schussler sells Rainforest Café to Landry's Seafood Restaurants and forms Schussler Creative so he can create several different restaurant concepts simultaneously. — Rainforest Café is the Platinum winner of the 20th annual "Restaurant and Institutions Choice of Chains Customer Satisfaction Awards."

**2001** — Schussler appointed to board of Smile Network International, which does reconstructive surgery for children in developing countries.

**2006** — Schussler sells 80 percent of T-Rex and an Asian-themed concept to Landry's for \$7.6 million; Disney chooses both concepts to build at Walt Disney World. — T-Rex opens in Kansas City in the Legends Mall, with Build-A-Dino shop based on the Build-A-Bear chain of stores.

music and gliding waiters kind of atmosphere, making it about as far from Rainforest or T-Rex that one can imagine.

Other ideas are percolating in the early development stages, including: a magic-themed restaurant inspired by the work of J.K. Rowling; a jazz-infused nightclub called Aerobleu that evokes Paris in the 1940s; a "Hot Dog Hall of Fame," with hot dogs and fixings from all over the world; and a road-house restaurant that will attract all ages including grandparents sitting next to motorcycle enthusiasts.

Most of the concepts are due to become reality within the next year or two, with partnership deals being inked in Las Vegas, New York, Los Angeles and Orlando. Disney has flown up several times, based on their enthusiasm for T-Rex, and have expressed interest in partnering on more concepts.

## Man Behind the Mind

Although Schussler seems like he enjoys being the crazy guy who shouts across the office, he's far from truly distractible. Never married and with no children—but happily in a relationship—Schussler admits that being an entrepreneur can doom some marriages, but he insists he's not wed to the job. He simply enjoys the daily romance of spinning out concepts and watching them, step by step, be made into reality.

"You have to have passion for what you do, for what you think," Schussler says. "I believe that many people don't. But when you allow yourself to feel truly passionate about something, it spawns ideas, and those lead to other ideas, and then you have a room full of dinosaurs in your office."

He admits that enthusiasm isn't enough to get concepts off the ground, though. As he found with Rainforest, funding can be a challenge, especially when funneling so much money into prototypes and research.

"Everyone has a different opinion of how much money, time, commitment and creativity you have to give to each project,"

**"You have to have passion for what you do, for what you think. I believe that many people don't. But when you allow yourself to feel truly passionate about something, it spawns ideas, and those lead to other ideas, and then you have a room full of dinosaurs in your office."**

**—Steve Schussler**

he says, in a rare moment of chatting about the downsides of his work. But, in the next second, he bounces back up like a ball. "Hey, whaddya gonna do, right? Research is about spending money and you're all working toward a common goal, so you get past the challenges."

Despite the issues involved with funding extensive research, Schussler is confident that the current crop of concepts will find homes, and within the next few years, people will go to a sports stadium and get a hot dog creation from Germany, or spend their anniversary surrounded by Asian warriors crafted from minute fragments of elephant bone and ivory.

When asked why he embarks on these elaborate concepts, going from jazz to road-houses to China, the guy from New York just shrugs, as if following through on every idea, no matter how outlandish, is just what people do. "You have to expand your horizons and be creative," he says. "What I love is that no two of my days is alike, there's no routine at all, except turning on the electronic kites in the office when I come in."

Compelling, too, is that some ideas whipped up in a bland office park in Golden Valley are going to end up at Walt Disney World. "The fact that this little team from Minnesota can get Disney to embrace what we're doing is pretty cool," he says. ☺

Elizabeth Millard is a frequent contributor to *MinnesotaBusiness Magazine*.