

80 Todd Nienkerk, BA '05, BS '05, Four Kitchen Studios

# THE ALCALDE

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2006

The road barely accommodated the width of my vehicle... Overloaded as I was, had one tire slipped from the pavement, the entire 70,000 lb. would have rolled. I knew if the truck rolled I would certainly die... Because I was hauling a trailer, I could not stop or slow suddenly or the trailer would jackknife. I knew if the trailer jackknifed I would certainly die as well. I was also loaded top-heavy, so curves of more than 30 or so degrees had to be navigated at a near-crawl to keep from flipping.

## THE LONG WAY HOME

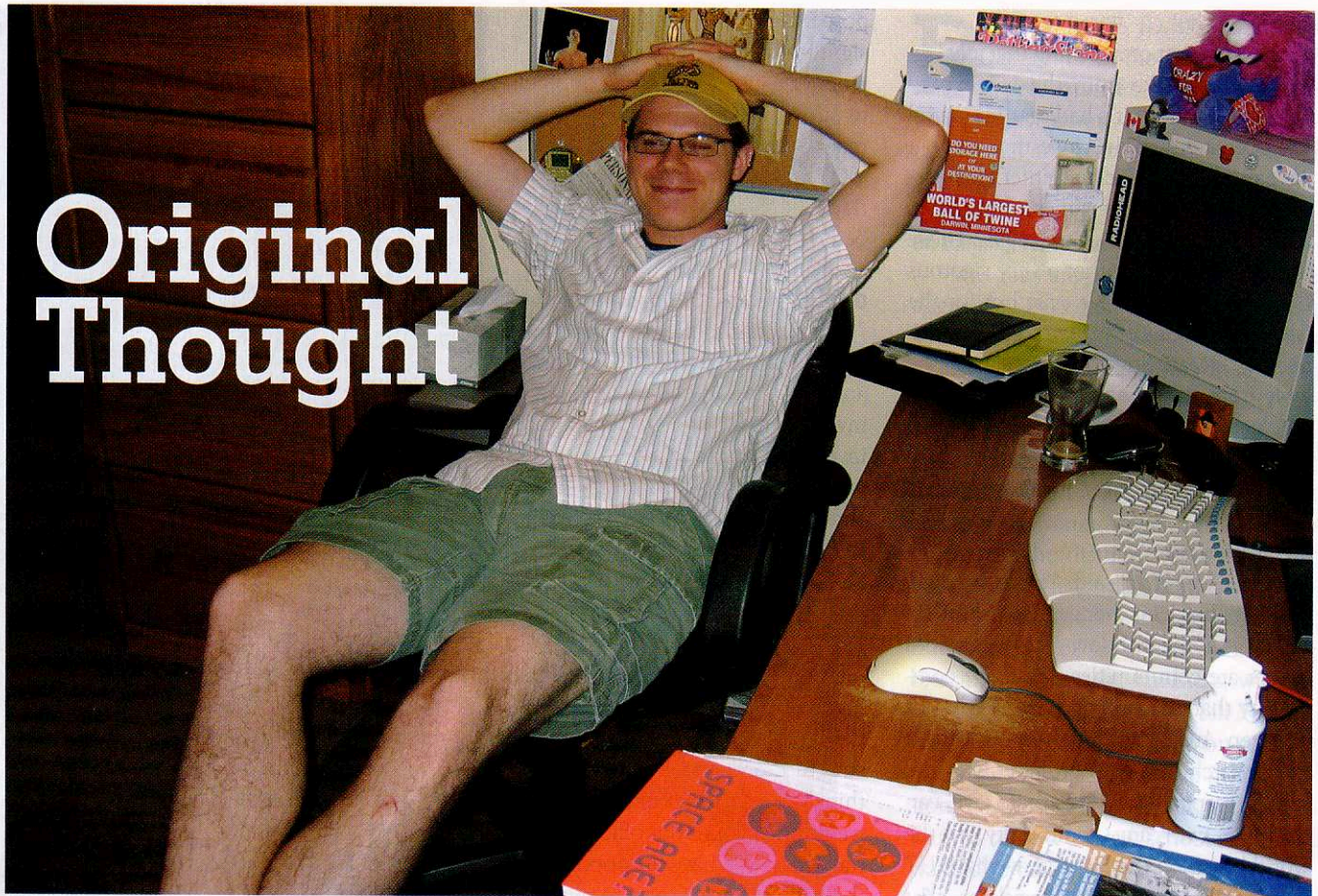
A GRITTY PORTRAIT OF ONE DAY'S WORK IN IRAQ. BY SETH HARP, BA '06



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TIM TALLIAFERRO

## Todd Nienkerk, BA '05, BS '05, aspires to make his Four Kitchen Studios 'the GSD&M of the publishing business'

**T**ODD NIENKERK, BA '05, BS '05, LASTED EXACTLY ONE YEAR AND ONE DAY in the world of cubicles, staff meetings, and pressed khaki pants. Stifled by the doldrums of an 8-to-5er, he co-founded Four Kitchen Studios, a "creative collective" that does "anything and everything involving creativity and publishing." He and his comrades are creativity consultants, hired guns sought for their technical skill and restless imaginations. They'll spruce up your Web page, brighten your documents, and come up with that type of clever radio or TV ad that always makes people wonder, "Who thinks of this stuff?"

Four Kitchen Studios operates as a hub for quirky people with specific skill sets, a one-stop shop for companies desperately in need of talent. Between the four founding members there's a freelance writer, a computer scientist/political campaigner, a cartoonist, and a graphic designer/Webmaster/writer. Then there's the talent pool — a small army of freelance writers, editors, designers, comics, ninjas, and artists with other full-time jobs but on whom the founders can call when a project requires their expertise.

Their collective inspiration for the company came from working on the Texas Travesty, UT's humor magazine. The four met there as students and decided, over the many, many late nights they worked together, that it was basically what they wanted to do for the rest of their lives — have this sort of creative freedom and apply it toward something profitable, something that will pay the bills while they do the fun stuff.

### What's in a Name

Our first client was this guy out in Bastrop who had built a nine-bedroom, four-kitchen house in the middle of the woods. It was like, "Eccentric old man builds Ewok village." That's what this place looked like. Yet he left the place wide open, and no one had ever lived there. So the place was infested with mud daubers and all kinds of nasty little vermin. We were trying to strike a deal with this guy where we would do some Web design for him in return for free rent, and it turned into a really bad business deal. A really bad business deal. But we kept the name because it's snappy. Mostly, 99 percent, it's a catchy title for a company, and we really like it. One percent is: vet your clients, do a

## 'We're T-shirt and jeans; we're not stained wife-beater and cut-offs.'

little bit of research, and don't let them entice you with lame-brain schemes of, "You can live in my house and do Web design."

### **Collective Consciousness**

If one person sits down and does something, it can usually be pretty good. But if that person is constantly getting feedback from other people who know what they're talking about, it's going to be excellent. And that's a big part of what we're trying to do. We're drawing from that entire talent pool. Everyone there has a really good design aesthetic. They may not be able to do what needs to be done because they don't know the software or they don't know the technique. But they'll know it when they see it. I trust everybody there to give me really good feedback. And if they don't like something, they just say it. There's none of this political couching. The way we approach it is, if something isn't good, speak up now and be brutal. And if you can't take it, you shouldn't be here.

### **Motto**

We don't waste our time with figuring out what other people charge or how other companies go about doing their business. The motto that we're all sort of investing in is: do what you love, and the money will follow. And so far, we haven't had any trouble finding work. It just falls into our lap, left and right. I think it's because people pick up on this vibe that we have as a company, that we're all just bristling to do creative stuff.

### **Web Business**

The importance of having an office with a lounge with sofas and receptionists and stuff like that is increasingly unimportant. However, I hope that we get to the point very quickly that we will have an office downtown with a receptionist and a waiting area, because when you reach that point, you're a firm. For the time being, we are operating out of our apartment,

and we do that to save a lot of money, and, as a result, we can charge people a lot less. So I would say that the Web has almost eliminated the barrier to entry for a lot of creative and entrepreneurial types like myself and the people I'm working with.

### **One-Year Goal**

Boy, I'm barely thinking two months from now.

### **Two-Month Goal**

Doing pretty well. Self-sufficient. I guess a year from now I would like to see us in an office with creative space. My real inspiration as far as proof that this can be done is GSD&M. Either G, S, D, or M — I don't know which one — spoke at my commencement ceremony when I graduated a year ago, and he just struck me as such a cool guy. [It was S — Roy Spence, BS '71.] And I was already sort of in awe of GSD&M and the fact that they were all recent UT grads who said, "You know what, we don't want to work for anybody; let's start our own company." And against all odds, they did it. I very much see ourselves doing exactly that, but in a slightly different realm. They're doing advertising, and we're going to be doing publishing. I would like to turn our company into the GSD&M of the publishing business.

### **No More Khakis**

I love the fact that now, not only can I work until I'm tired, and then go to bed and wake up when I'm rested, but I can now take off in the middle of the day. If I decide, "You know, I'm just not feeling it today, I'm not getting the kind of work done that I need to and there's no use trying," I'm going to go down to the pool at my apartment complex and hang out for a few hours and just relax.

### **Nudginess**

This kind of business model entirely relies on people being completely self-motivated. And none of us are. So the

idea that we are a collective and that we are all relying on each other provides a nudge. We are all, just by our mere presence in the same similar area, nudging each other towards, "Hey, let's get this thing done. Let's do this." It's nudginess. And it works. But we need to know each other really well. This extremely informal approach would not work in a company where people have been cobbled together from résumés.

### **What It's Like to Love Your Job**

I love my job. My job is my life. I wake up in the morning, and I sit down at my desk, and I just start to work. And I work until I can't work any longer. Then, if I want to take the evening off and hang out with my fiancée, that's just what we do. I'm the kind of person who loves taking work home with him if it's good. I've always been that way. If I'm really into a project, and if I really enjoy it, it's going to consume me. And that's exactly what we're trying to do. We're trying to filter out all the garbage and take in work that will consume us.

### **Stirring Finale to Interview**

What we're trying to do is merge work and heart. Our attitude is: we're going to do stuff and interact with our clients in a way that's fun and different and totally not at all stodgy. Yet not sloppy. We're T-shirt and jeans; we're not stained wife-beater and cut-offs. We try to be fun but still be taken very seriously. I want people to walk away from dealing with our company saying, "They were a lot of fun to work with, and they were highly professional." And that kind of mix you just don't really see in the business place. To continue the kitchen analogy, it's the pinch of humor, the zest, the dash — whatever your spice or seasoning metaphor is for such a thing — that's what we are. —*Tim Taliaferro*