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When Passion Pays Off

Dream job concept expands into reality television

by Kevin Friedman

When Vocation Vacations began allowing desk jockeys to test-drive their dream jobs in 2004, founder Brian Kurth said he knew his concept company was ripe for reality television.

After being courted by several television producers, he settled on the Travel Channel. This *Job's a Trip* will air next month.

When many envision adventure vacations, images of bungee jumping, rafting the Amazon or big game hunting safaris come to mind. But Vocation Vacations offers something different. For corporate cubicalists wondering if they might be happier running a bakery, opening a wine shop or even announcing professional sports games, the company provides opportunities to step into the shoes of one's dream job for several days, complete with mentoring and coaching from accomplished professionals in the field.

Kurth, a youthful man with close cropped hair and a neatly trimmed goatee, provides dreamers thinking about new careers a way to find out if the change is worth the risk.

While the concept might seem a bit left-of-center—paying to work for someone else on your vacation—it has certainly paid excellent dividends for Kurth, a former telecommunications and dot-com executive from Chicago who relocated to Portland following his own dream to escape working for “the man.” When we met, Kurth sported jeans and a warm-up jacket, looking very much like someone who is his own boss.

“About four years ago, my partner and I were laid off, literally on the same day,” says Kurth, “and instead of trying to find other jobs, we took a road trip. Driving around the country, we encountered so many people who hated their careers, and it helped me decide to start this business.”

Since its inception, Vocation Vacations has evolved into a multinational company, with offices in the United States and London offering mentoring, coaching and opportunities to experience careers as diverse as coffee shop owner and minor league baseball manager. But the next stage for the company, the television series, will likely be its biggest.

Produced in conjunction with the Travel Channel and Brave St. Productions, the reality-based program follows participants as they take part in a Vocation Vacation—mini-quests into possible new careers.

Each episode focuses on different people and vocations, highlighting the variety the company offers. “For the show, we chose really active vocations, like working in a restaurant or whitewater rafting,” explains Kurth. But there’s never a shortage of drama in any of the vacations offered.

Tim Healea of Pearl Bakery is one of the original mentors for Vocation Vacations and has worked with roughly a dozen aspiring bakers during the past year and a half.

“I gauge what they want out of the experience,” he says. “In the two days the clients spend with us, they get a trial run for those curious about opening a business. People are always amazed at how much

work and how intricate the process is. The hours suck, the profit margin is low, and it’s not great for a personal life. Every day is a labor of love.”

Kurth says: “We don’t sugarcoat things. This isn’t a fantasy vacation like a rock ‘n’ roll camp. We want to pull the curtains back to show people the reality of what they’re getting into. Sometimes we remove the romance involved in a profession, but with due diligence, we’re providing a reality element.”



Baker and mentor Tim Healea (right) teaches his trade to Matt Jaffe.

According to Kurth, the concept of bringing Vocation Vacations to television was one of the original ideas of his business plan, as is the book deal he just signed with Warner Publishing.

“By the summer of 2004, we were already being courted by television producers,” he explains. But as with all of the companies that Vocation Vacations aligns itself with, there was a screening process. “We could be bigger, but we say no to a lot of businesses. It can’t be all about the money. They have to share the passion.”

That mutual passion looks to pay off. “The pilot for *This Job's a Trip* received the highest possible focus group rating,” Kurth says proudly. “So the Travel Channel bought all 13 episodes on the spot. Now my business employs 20 to 25 people in New York,” he exclaims, referring to Brave St. Production’s staff working on *This Job's a Trip*.

Kurth, who is gay, notes that while several of the mentors and coaches the company uses are queer, sexuality is a nonissue. “We don’t hide that I’m gay in order to screen from the get-go, to avoid right-wing mentors hosting someone different. It avoids problems.”

Despite the number of plates Kurth has spinning in the air—the business, the television show, a book deal—he comes across as relaxed and at ease with his life. Perhaps he perfectly personifies the potential of Vocation Vacations—someone who followed his dreams and found them to his liking. Asked if he’d considered selling the company, Kurth says: “I’m having too much fun and learning too much. It’s evolved into my own dream job because it incorporates so many of my passions.”

THIS JOB'S A TRIP debuts 8 p.m. April 27 on the Travel Channel.

Portland free-lance writer KEVIN FRIEDMAN spends his time pursuing his various dream jobs as writer, editor and musician. He can be contacted at kfriedman@earthlink.net.



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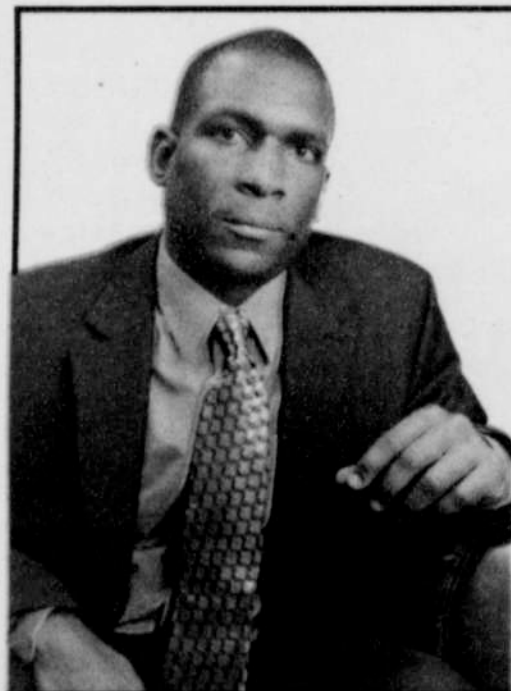
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