

A profusion of industrial designers

By Natalie Myers, Staff Writer

Local network helps bring ideas to market

Don Nguyen, Peter Prip and Gorm Bressner did not graduate together, but they do have something in common: All three are industrial designers who stayed in the Ocean State after graduating from Rhode Island School of Design.

And according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, they have plenty of company in their profession. In 2005, the agency reported, Rhode Island ranked second in the country for its concentration of industrial designers, topped only by Michigan.

The Ocean State has 540 working industrial designers, the bureau said – or slightly more than one per 1,000 workers. Their average annual income is \$55,770.

Part of the attraction is the close-knit community, said Bressner, who owns a design and consulting firm, Gorm Design, that specializes in product development and product-to-market strategies for the food and beverage industry.

“In Rhode Island, instead of six degrees, the degree of separation is two or three,” he said. “Once you tap into one person, it flows pretty freely to the next.” For example, Bressner met Nguyen through mutual friends. Prip met Bressner through a faculty member at RISD. And Nguyen met Prip because both men were teaching a class at RISD.

As a result of those connections, the three men are now collaborating to get Prip’s patented invention, a new grill-top cooking tool, to market.

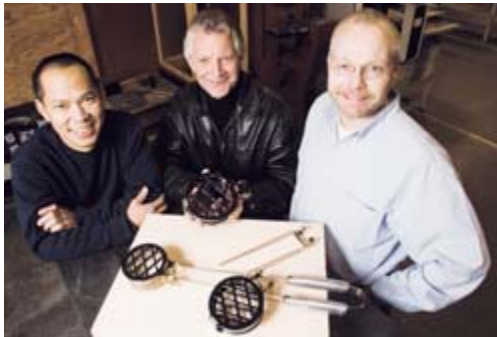
“It’s a food mold for the grill,” Prip said. “It allows a new kind of cuisine to be grilled.”

The trio meets once a week to brainstorm and act as a sounding board for Prip. Nguyen brings to the table his experience as a designer and manufacturer. He owns and operates Providence Machine & Tool Works Inc. with two of his brothers in Olneyville.

Bressner brings his professional experience in bringing a product to market. “They have the expertise I don’t,” said Prip, who teaches “Metals I” as an adjunct professor at RISD. “I have no money to hand these people ... if the product is successful, they get a cut of that.”

If the product is successful, Nguyen said, he has the shop to manufacture the product. Bressner said that he got involved because he thinks Prip’s invention has a shot. It’s already received some attention from Williams-Sonoma.

The three greatest challenges for inventors in getting their invention to market, Bressner said, are finding the financial resources; bringing the idea to the right contacts; and perseverance, because it takes years to



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Don Nguyen, left, is working with Peter Prip, a silversmith, and Gorm Bressner, right, an industrial designer, to bring Prip’s grill-top cooking tools to market. The ones shown here can grill anything from vegetables to fish and hold ingredients and marinades together.

“If I need prototype work ... laser cutting ... all these resources are available to me,” he said. “All I have to do – if I have a need for something – is pick up the phone, and it’s pretty much there.”

And the collaboration among industrial designers isn’t unique to Prip’s invention, Bressner said. “There’s certainly a hidden network of people working with each other.” Nguyen has first-hand experience with that network. He said he’s collaborated with several designers and technology startups within the past five years.

More recently, he teamed up with cyberMDx to design a 3D ultrasound machine that has attracted some interest from NATO and Doctors Without Borders.

The machine is designed for telemedicine, the delivery of medicine at a distance, Nguyen said. It would be hooked up to a solar-powered laptop that would store the ultrasound images. The laptop could then upload the images to a satellite, which could send them anywhere in the world for further analysis.

“We’re sort of seeking capital now,” Nguyen said.

He added: “I’m a small cog in the works. As far as being a designer, that’s as much as you can do.”

As for why industrial designers stay in or move to the Ocean State, Nguyen said, he thinks it’s because technology makes it so people can do design work anywhere.

“When I left RISD, I didn’t want to move to New York City, because of the quality of life there,” he said. “With the community of RISD and designers around ... the collaboration and how small the town is, the designers all know each other and help each other.”

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