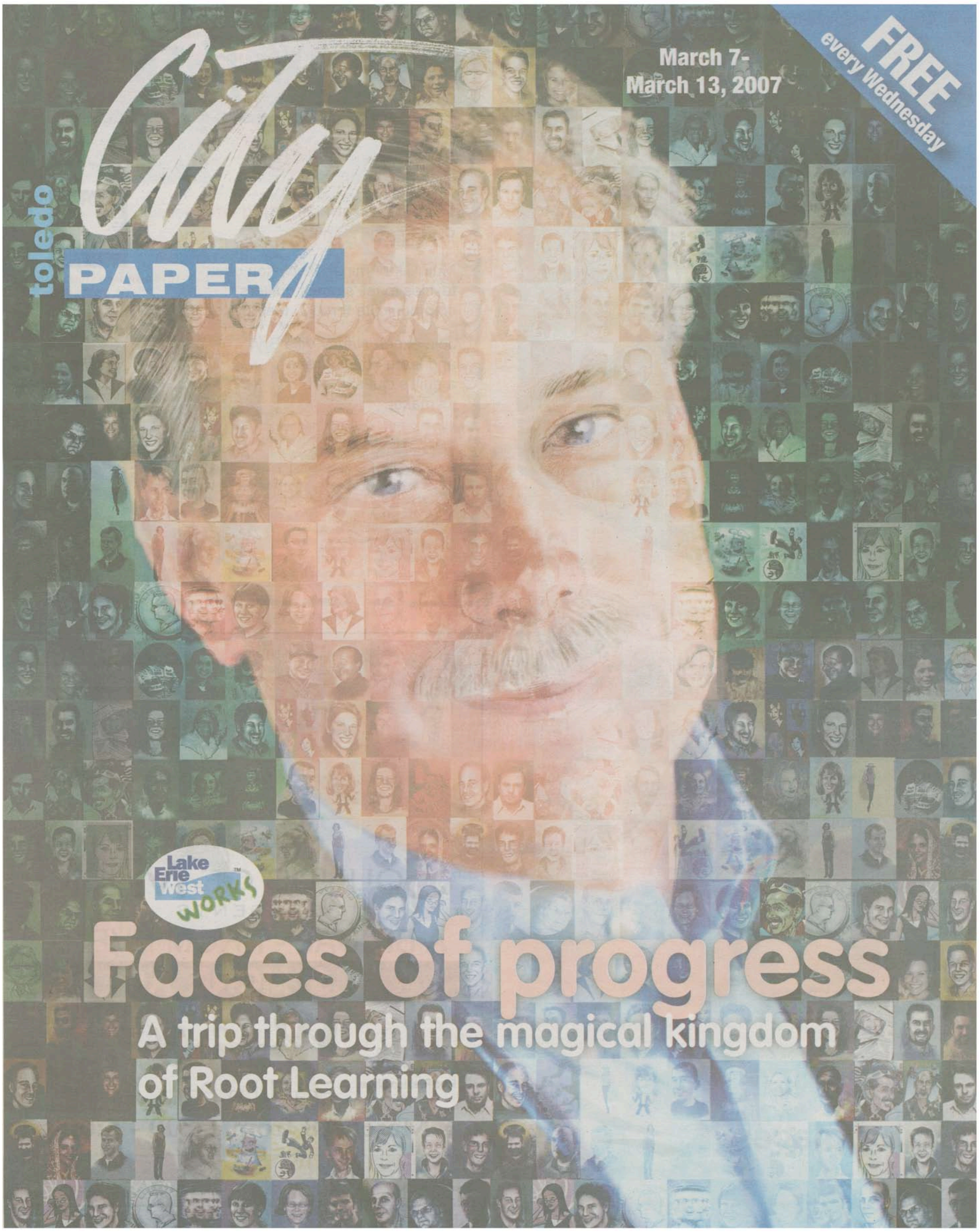
toledo City PAPER

March 7-
March 13, 2007

FREE
every Wednesday



Lake Erie West WORKS™

Faces of progress

A trip through the magical kingdom of Root Learning

Lake Erie West WORKS™ is an award-winning City Paper series profiling our region's accomplished professionals, including hair designer David Broadway, graphic designer Terry Lesniewicz, Kerr House founder Laurie Hostetler and film production designers Josh and Tracy Weil. We will continue to shine a spotlight upon local men and women who bring attention from around the country to our area.

Faces of progress

A trip through the magical kingdom of Root Learning by Jason Webber

Cover and left: an illustration of Jim Haudan, composited using images of company employees, by Adam Hastings of Root Learning.

To the starch shirted corporate drones trapped in Dilbertland, Root Learning CEO Jim Haudan must look like a lunatic.

The guy lets his employees come to work in jeans, T-shirts and Doc Martens. The walls of the 17,000 square foot interior are the colors of Popsicles, and the 75 or so employees are allowed — nay, encourged — to decorate their desks with just about anything they desire, from toys to pictures torn from magazines.

And Haudan himself doesn't sit in the stereotypical trappings of corporate America. There's no swanky oak desk watched over by a tacky motivational poster displaying a seminar-friendly words like 'Success' or 'Goals.' Rather, the 50-year old, soft-spoken man with the firm handshake and Mr. Rogers-like demeanor rules this magical kingdom from a desk decorated to reflect his own personality — books on management and success, family photos and even plastic pink flamingos. There's also a bobblehead of his likeness staring back at him, a gift from his staffers a few years back.

So, yes, Root Learning is a bit crazy. But here's what's crazier: More than 200 of the world's Fortune 500 companies have done business with Haudan and his corporate counter-culture minions. Companies like JC Penney, Pepsi and Taco Bell have Root Learning on speed dial because this is where you go if you if you need to find out how to get your point across to employees and clients in an easy-to-understand, creative fashion. For employers sick of griping to those who just cannot seem to decipher their message "What do I have to do, draw you a picture?" Root Learning says, "Yes."

And how this system of conveying thoughts in the corporate world all came about is the craziest story of all.

Seeds of change

It was 1974 at Central Catholic High School and all was not well. Due to budget cuts, the school's coaching staff was likely going to be gutted, with several beloved faculty members receiving pink slips.

On a warm day during the year of Nixon's resignation, then 12th-grader and Toledo native Jim Haudan and his girlfriend Michelle helped lead a walkout of the entire 1600-member student body to protest the anticipated firing of the coaches.

As he recounts that act of adolescent civil disobedience, Haudan, seated in a booth at BW3, smiles warmly and takes a sip from his frosted glass of Blue Moon.

"We were pretty animated and emotional about it," he says, referring to the walkout, which would end up becoming a pivotal event in Haudan's life.

By the time the nation's Bicentennial rolled around, Haudan had married Michelle (they now have celebrated 30 years of marriage and have three children together) and ended up working at Central Catholic as their football coach — hired by the very administration he had earlier led the walkout against. In fact, it was the walkout that got him the job, after then-Central Catholic Principal Father John Thomas was impressed with the leadership skills Haudan showed in helping organize the student uprising.

"(Thomas) said, 'Look, if you can lead t(the walkout), you can lead a lot of other things. So I need you on this team."

'Usually, creatives get thought of as the 'starving artist' and not really being functional in a corporate society. But we are putting art into its most functional form and it's very exciting.'

— Victor Zhang, Concepter, Root Learning

Haudan coached Central Catholic's football team, worked as the assistant to Thomas, and attended the University of Toledo where he earned a degree in recreation (he would later receive an MBA from there too). While working as the assistant, Haudan had an epiphany concerning organizational leadership that would change his life.

"It was a profound realization about how to lead by being of service to others. Not with arrogant opinions of how you can do it better or pinpointing where others are failing, but having a fundamental belief that people in their role need to be supported in their success. How do we make them smarter, better, more capable and enable them to achieve?"

Today, this concept is called 'servant leadership' and is one of the core values of Root Learning, the company that Haudan joined in 1987, after deciding that he wanted to explore this 'servant leadership' further on a career level.

And then Haudan's life got even more colorful. Literally.

Wanna be a good Rootizen? Have fun!

They call it 'Strategic Engagement Process.' Not exactly an exciting name, but wait until you see it come alive.

It's rather simple — companies will hire Root Learning to break down vague, difficult-to-understand processes and strategies into engaging, entertaining and easy-to-swallow concepts The team of Root employees — called 'Rootizens' — will draw large, colorful, flow-chart illustrations that show how a process or system works. Projects can range from human resources concepts like workplace diversity to basic customer service processes, such as shipping and expediting (both FedEx and UPS are clients of Root Learning). It's like "Schoolhouse Rock" for adults.

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

But they do more than just create pretty pictures. With 3D graphics, computer presentations or games, Root Learning does whatever it takes to convert a difficult concept into something informative and engaging.

Before Haudan came on board in 1987, Root Learning was known as Root Publishing and the firm specialized in corporate communications and newsletters. Though founder Randy Root turned Root Publishing into a wildly successful enterprise, the company didn't focus on visual-based teaching materials. But in 1984, Root — who still maintains a close friendship with Haudan, despite retiring in 2000 — was introduced by the Sweden-based Foresight Group to some radical concepts about how people learn and retain information better through visual media. By marrying Haudan's philosophy of 'servant leadership' with what Root had learned, a whole new system of educating people had been born. They called it The Root Learning Map process and today it remains the core of the Strategic Engagement Process.

And applying the Process is seriously fun.

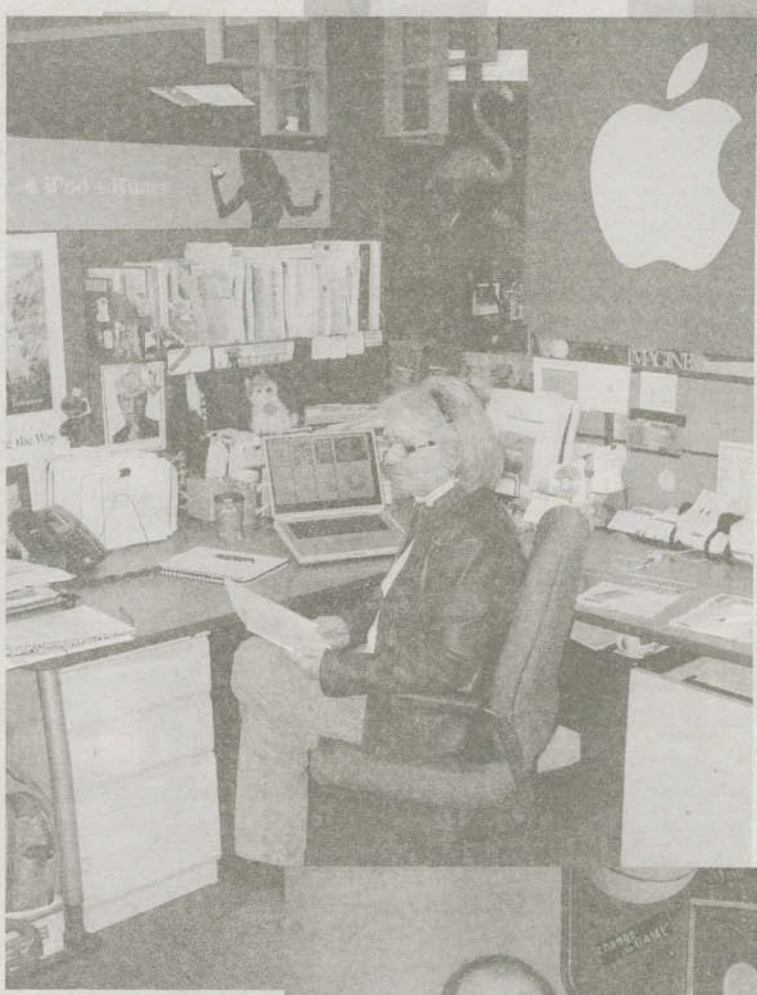
Just ask Victor Zhang, who works as a 'concepter,' which is Rootspeak for 'artist.' The young man stands before a large easel, sketching out a Learning Map for First Energy's finance department titled "How to Make Money Grow." Zhang will work on an illustration for about eight hours before it's passed on to other concepters for inking, coloring and finalizing. The piece then is passed on to the production team for cropping, revising and readying the materials for presentation. Zhang's been a Rootizen for 9 years and unsurprisingly, he loves it here.

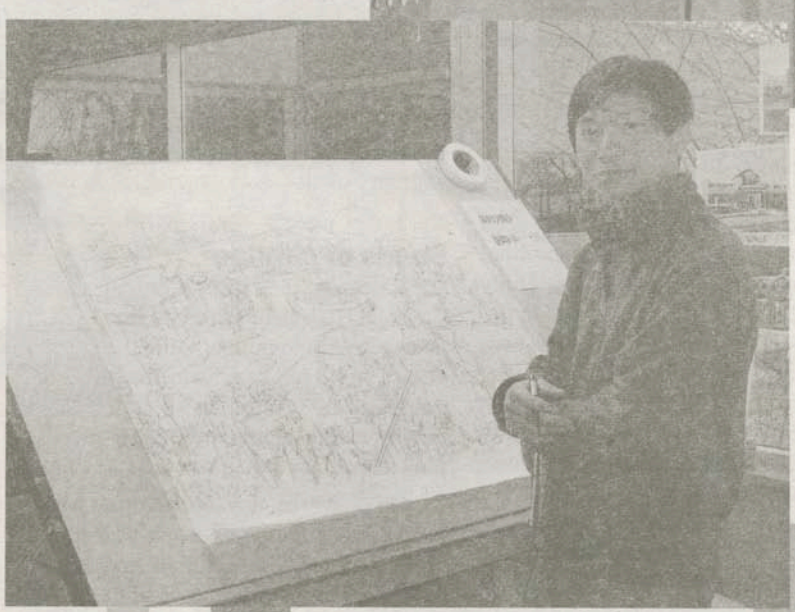
"What makes us special is the way people support each other for their success," says Zhang. "Usually, creatives get thought of as the 'starving artist' and not really being functional in a corporate society. But we are putting art into its most functional form and it's very exciting."

Jason Stafne's concepter job proves it's never too late to do a career about-face. After earning a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from UT and working for a decade in the field, he decided he'd had enough and wanted to further his first love: art. He took art classes at night and began looking for illustrator jobs in the Toledo area. After a fruitless search, he began plans to relocate to Boston, Los Angeles, New York or Chicago; someplace with a more art-friendly reputation.

"But lo and behold, I found this place," says Stafne, seated at his desk. "I kind of stumbled into it, and I couldn't be happier."

It's easy to see why. Not only do the denizens of this land get to draw pictures all day, but Haudan treats his subjects with care. At Christmastime, no one here received a fruitcake or candy as a 'thank you' for a job well done — they got iPod Shuffles. There's an entire wall where Rootizens display their children's pictures. And all Rootizens have a computer generated caricature of them hanging on an adjacent wall.





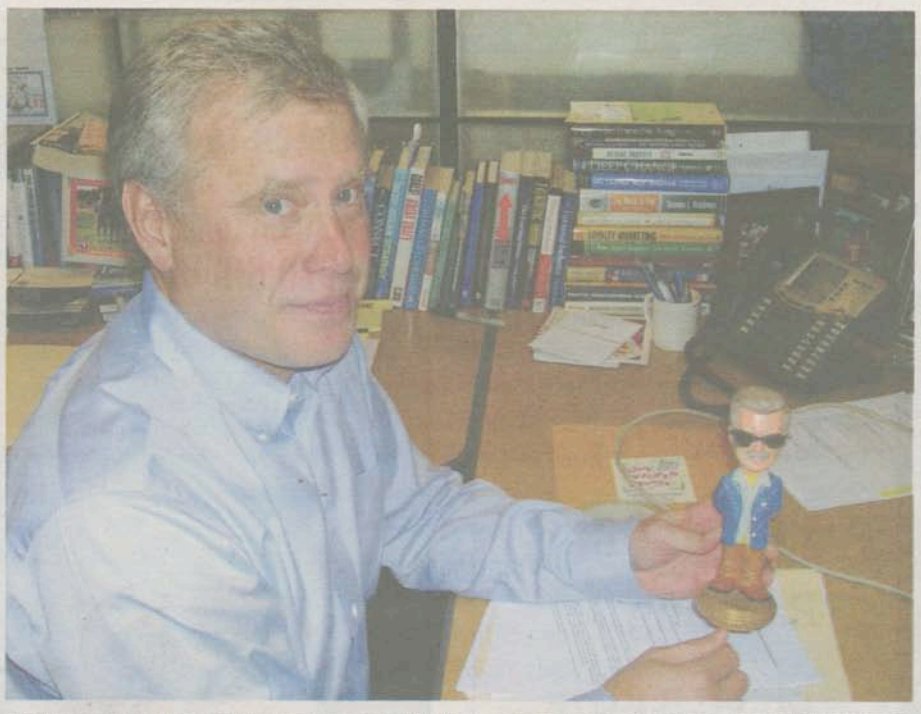
The cool and the crazy: (Top) Haudan's assistant Karen Proffitt is fiercely devote to Root Learning ... and Apple products. (Middle) Concepter Jason Stafne contemplates slam-dunking his Chucky doll. (Bottom) One picture is worth thousands of dollars in profit in the hands of conceptor Victor Zhang.

"'Fun is another of our core values," says Haudan, sauntering through the office, smiling at workers, who smile back sincerely. "We believe if you're not having fun, what's the point?"

Laughing all the way to the bank

So the rebel who organized the Great Central Catholic High School Walkout of 1974 grew up to be the rebel who revolutionized the way Really Big Companies operate. You'd think after 20 years of seeing his concept of 'servant leadership' change corporate cultures while providing him a healthy paycheck, that Haudan would be tempted to sit back, listen to his favorite Jimmy Buffett CD (he's a devoted Parrothead) and bask in his success while letting others do the grunt work.

But he's still having too much fun. And besides, Root Learning is still growing. Since Haudan assumed the role of CEO in 2000, the company has opened offices in London, Chicago and Zurich, Switzerland and in 2005 and 2006 were ranked among the top 25 on the list of Top 50 Small & Medium Companies to Work for In America by the Great Place to Work Institute. They've won dozens of other industry awards and have been profiled in The Wall St. Journal, Harvard Business Review, Fast Company and other respected periodicals.



Root Learning CEO Jim Haudan poses with his personalized, employee-made bobblehead.

But at the epicenter of this business Wonderland lies the simple concepts that Haudan brought with him to Root Learning.

"I saw an interview with Robert Redford the other day," says Haudan, who counts Redford's classic "The Sting" as his favorite movie. "He was talking about his Sundance Film Festival and how he has always been driven by the feeling that if you could do better, you should. All I've done, really, is just try to find better ways. It's that simple."

Crazy, no?

The Roots of time

A severely abridged history of Root Learning

1978
Randy Root founds Root Publishing, a consulting/publishing firm specializing in corporate newsletters.

1987
Jim Haudan joins Root and his forward-thinking communication/learning methodologies take the company into the relatively untapped world of strategic learning.

1991
The Root Learning Map process debuts. Preston Trucking in Pittsburgh becomes the first client to use the system and it is a raging success.

1993
Root Publishing becomes Root Learning.

2000
Randy Root retires and Haudan is appointed president and CEO. The company opens offices in Chicago, London and Zurich.

Visit www.rootlearning.com to view the company's complete — and entertaining — history.