Award-winning font designer traces path of success from the Peninsula

By Michelle Fisher
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In today's digital age, users take for granted the software behind the text on-screen, including the fonts giving it shape. Successful font developer David J. Ross, who grew up in Rancho Palos Verdes, says that fonts are essentially software, little programs that run on computers.

"Fonts are more successful when you don't have to think about them, although I spend a lot of time thinking about them," says Ross, one of six full-time designers at The Font Bureau in Boston.

With only a handful of companies specializing in fonts, Ross feels extremely fortunate to be a part of this elite group. The 20-something already has three typefaces to his name, including Climax, which was awarded the Certificate of Excellence in Type Design by the Type Directors Club in 2007. Ross designed Climax for the student newspaper while attending Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., and created Manicotti and Trilby once he turned pro (see www.fontbureau.com/fonts/Trilby).

"To me, type design is at the confluence of design, art and technology," Ross says, explaining that fonts are to typefaces what MP3 formats are to songs: the technology behind the expression.

Ross credits Palos Verdes on the Net for nurturing his passion for technology and art at **a** young age. He was in junior high when he began his multimedia internship at the nonprofit computer center in RPV.

"I've been into graphic design since middle school, but Hampshire and the other schools in the consortium didn't have a graphic design program, so I began to approximate one with independent studies," Ross recalls. "I became very interested in design's most basic elements, type being a major one. Since I like drawing, I got into calligraphy and making letters."

David J. Ross

While he still sketches his ideas, Ross notes that drawing now happens on computers.

"My main job is to draw letters, but on any day I could be researching different writing systems or software, doing programming and the like," says Ross, who is currently working on a Greek font.

It has been a decade since Ross completed his PVNET

internship, yet he still relies on the initiative and problem-solving skills he gained there. He emphasizes that the fun, collaborative environment prepared him for college and beyond.

"One of the things I remember loving about PVNET was learning about whatever I wanted," Ross says. "I worked on the short 3-D film 'Just in Time,' which was about aliens. I helped out with various things. I really liked the teamwork and learning from other students."

He says it was exciting to use professional software like ColdFusion and Photoshop, which were not as readily available then. Besides computer animation, Ross dabbled in Web design, HTML and programming, and recalls encountering many challenges along the way.

"At PVNET, there wasn't anyone holding my hand. Everything I did I had to figure it out for myself, and it prepared me very well for college and then for work afterward," Ross says.

Ted Vegvari, PVNET's founding director, echoes that his interns come away with much more than computer skills.

"They are doing the same work we are, hitting their foreheads against their desks like the rest of us: researching, figuring out how to learn, overcoming obstacles. It's challenging," Vegvari says.

Challenging but rewarding, he adds, noting with pride that Ross is the first PVNET intern to pursue font design. Vegvari knows this because he stays in touch with students and their families through the years.

"We had a chance to contribute to shaping David's skills and keeping him interested, to make it exciting and challenging for him. You can't ask for more than that," he says.

Vegvari also recalls imparting business knowledge to Ross and other interns in the 1990s.

"He was here when we set up a business incubator for video on demand way before anyone else offered this, where people could download videos from our Web site," he says. "We set up a business with a complete delivery system just to give kids this unique opportunity."

Another first that Ross accomplished at PVNET was creating the original horse animation for the city of Rolling Hills Estates Web site.

"I gave him an assignment to animate a horse. He had to learn Flash to do it, and it took about six months," Vegvari recalls. "Students receive assistance, but we don't do the work for them. We challenge them to complete it on their own."

Today, Ross continues to be challenged to think outside of the box because his field is so specialized. At The Font Bureau, he explains, some fonts are custom designed for a specific client, while others go into the retail library. These fonts are used in print media, corporate identities, product packaging, video games and computer interfaces.

"Most of our fonts are going to big users of type, magazines and newspapers, companies with a high demand for fonts. We focus on making them very well crafted and well thought out," says Ross. "I like fonts that were designed with a purpose in mind and successfully fulfill that purpose in an inventive way ... There's no point in drawing what's already been drawn before?'

For more information about PVNET internships and courses, visit www.palosverdes.com/education or call (310) 541-7992.

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