

CASTING A WIDE NET

Technology smooths shift from L.A. scene to bucolic Berkshires

BY JOHN TOWNES

In the 1990s, the arrival of several high-tech operations that created visual effects for films, television and multi-media amusement rides fueled speculation that the Berkshires could become a center for this branch of the film and entertainment industry.

However, with the departure of many of the larger special-effects operations in the years that followed, the hope that this region could become a Hollywood on the Housatonic did not pan out to the degree that economic optimists had envisioned.

Nevertheless, that chapter of Berkshire history has continued to shape the region's economy in more subtle ways.

In addition to the continuing presence of the North Adams effects firm of Kleiser-Walczak Studios, these earlier projects had brought in numerous specialists in animation, visual effects, computer graphics and other fields as permanent or temporary staff. Some of these people have remained or returned to the Berkshires. They have either adapted their skills and applied them in other regional industries or figured out ways to continue in their professions in entertainment as freelancers or by starting small entrepreneurial ventures here.

One example of this is the experience of Robert and Jenny O'Haver, two California natives who moved from the Los Angeles area to Great Barrington in 2004.

They had previously worked temporarily in the Berkshires on entertainment projects in the 1990s. After returning to Los Angeles, the couple said they became increasingly restless there and began looking for possible places to move to. Their desire to leave Los Angeles intensified with the birth of their son, Ian, five years ago.

"We considered a lot of places," said Robert O'Haver. "Eventually we realized that we kept comparing every place we thought of to Berkshire County. So we said, 'Why don't we just move back to the Berkshires?'" and we started making our plans."

In deciding to relocate to the other side of the continent from Los Angeles, the couple also had to figure out a way to earn a living here.

Robert started a new business in computer services and education,



From the backyard deck at their Great Barrington home, Robert and Jenny O'Haver see the decision to relocate here to live and raise their son, Ian, in a positive light. In making the move, the couple have drawn heavily on computer technology to facilitate their respective careers and business ventures.

O'Haver + Company – Educational and Technical Consulting.

Jenny, meanwhile, transferred her existing Los Angeles-based business as a casting agent for films and media productions, which is called O'Haver + Company – Casting and Creative Services. She also works to develop projects for film and television.

Robert is also a co-owner of his wife's business, handling the technical aspects.

The training, consulting and technical services offered by Robert are not geographically limited, because there is a demand for them anywhere individuals and businesses use computers.

By contrast, on the surface it would seem that Jenny's business of auditioning and recommending actors for films, commercials and TV shows would have to be based in a major media center such as Los Angeles or New York.

However, she said that by incorporating new technology it is now possible to run her business seamlessly from the hills of western Massachusetts.

"It works out well," Jenny said. "But it would not have been possible until recently. I can do it now because

of new technology. Also having a husband who knows how to work with this technology is the other major reason I can run the business from here."

Demystifying technology

Robert worked in the entertainment business for 20 years in feature films, television and multimedia attractions as a visual-effects producer and supervisor. When he was in the Berkshires previously, he worked on the film "Stargate" and on the ride at the Luxor resort in Las Vegas, among other projects.

He said he became involved in computer technology indirectly.

"I started out as a project manager," he said. "Part of my job was to translate what was needed between the creative people and the technical staff. So I learned about computers and technology through that."

In 1994 he co-founded Visualfx.com, a website for visual effects producers. In 1999 that company was sold to Creative Planet and he joined their staff as a web publisher and marketing executive.

When he moved to the Berkshires, he established O'Haver + Company (528-6386 or www.ohaverco.com).

The venture is primarily oriented to this region, providing computer consulting and educational services to businesses and individuals. Specific services include basic computer operations, website development, databases and networking. He also established a web-hosting service, providing an online home for web sites.

While he provides a wide range of services, Robert said his emphasis is on helping businesses, organizations and individuals use emerging technology to communicate and interact more directly and effectively.

One of his basic goals is to demystify technology, and make the tools available understandable and accessible to everyone.

He has also developed a niche of teaching computer technology. This includes scheduled classroom courses, as well as individual lessons and training on-site or at his office by appointment.

"That aspect just happened as an outgrowth of my other work," he said. "I started giving lessons on a limited basis, and it caught on. As more people wanted to take lessons, it became a larger part of my business."

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O'Haver + Company

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As a volunteer, Robert also hosts Computer Therapy, a weekly radio show about technology on community radio station WBCR-LP in Great Barrington on Fridays at 9:30 a.m. (97.7 FM and online at www.berkshireradio.org). There are also archived files of his show on his own website.

Robert explained that recent advances in Internet and computer technology such as web logs ("blogs"), video and audio streaming and file transfers, podcasting, webcams and collaboration tools make it possible to do an increasing number of tasks more easily and in a more direct way.

This provide new opportunities to use these technologies in business and other spheres.

As an example, he cited blogs, which are online web pages that can be instantly updated and also allow visitors to make comments.

"Previously, changing a website was very complicated and cumbersome," he said. "You either had to have a professional do it, or take a lot of time to learn and do it on your own. But now with blogging, anyone can make changes directly from their computer instantaneously."

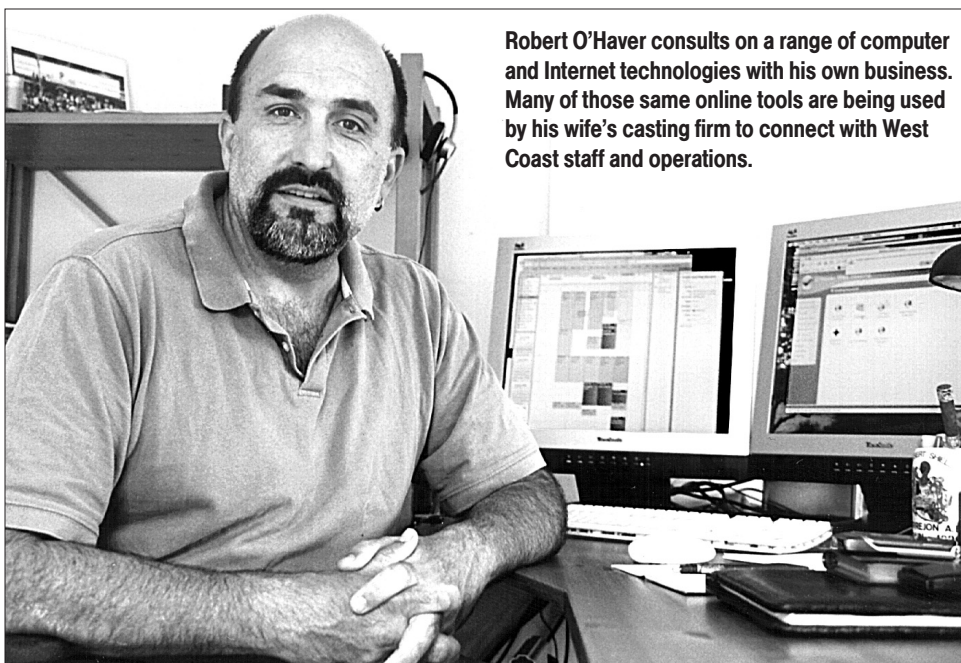
In addition to the most familiar type of blogging, which individuals use to publicly express themselves on the Internet, this is also a valuable tool for businesses and organizations, he said.

"For example, if you are a store owner, you can promote special sales and add or remove individual items on the site whenever you want," he said. "Or you can have a newsletter for your customers, and update it whenever you want."

Similar systems can also be used to communicate in other ways, such as collaboration on documents online. A consultant, for example, can help a client write and edit reports, proposals and other written material online without having to be in the same physical location.

Online audio and video technology adds another dimension to this type of communication, he added

Podcasting, for example, involves placing an audio file on a website. This can be downloaded, stored and listened to by visitors to the website at their convenience. Streaming technology is similar, but sends material directly in real time. Web conferencing technology enables two-way



Robert O'Haver consults on a range of computer and Internet technologies with his own business. Many of those same online tools are being used by his wife's casting firm to connect with West Coast staff and operations.

video and audio communication in real time.

"The uses for this are endless," he said. "A business can put a promotional video online, which potential customers can watch. It's also possible to put seminars or audio or video newsletters online."

He noted that all of these forms of communication can be either be made available to the general public or have their use limited to registered paying customers or restricted to specific individuals.

Robert believes that, among their other advantages, these technologies can help to alleviate a problem that has become an increasing concern. "I believe there's going to be even more interest in this with rising energy costs, because it can reduce the amount of driving and traveling you have to do," he said.

In addition to improving the ability to interact with customers in new ways, Robert noted that these technologies also broaden the potential market for businesses. "Small businesses are no longer limited to their own locality," he said. "They can cover a larger area or even go for an international market."

Casting on the computer

Jenny O'Haver's business is one example of how this new technology is being put into practice.

She began her career as a copywriter in Pittsburgh. After moving to Los Angeles in 1985, she wrote and produced commercials for the California Lottery. She then became involved in film and video development at Warner Brothers. Her casting experience grew out of a position with Barbara Claman Inc., where she worked with the Albert Brooks comedy "Defending Your Life," among other projects.

Jenny established her own casting firm in 1995, providing actors for theatrical productions, films, television programs and commercials. In addition to professional actors, she has developed a specialty of finding "real people" from other walks of life for specific roles.

Her firm (528-6728 or ohaver.net) still maintains an office and staff in Los Angeles, but she spends most of her time in Great Barrington, which she considers her company's headquarters.

"There are a lot of talented people in this area, but it's very difficult to find them when you need to."

Jenny explained that her job is to provide a manageable list of potential actors for a given role for the producers and directors of a project to choose from.

"I basically narrow down the choices for them," she said. "A client will request a certain 'look' or quality that they are looking for to fill a specific role. I then match that up with actors who fit that description. I might interview 60 actors for one role, and then give a list of 20 to the client. They make a final decision from the candidates I provide."

She relies on contacts she has made over the years and a large database of actors that she has worked with or who have submitted a resume to her firm.

In some cases, she is already familiar with actors who would be appropriate. She also constantly interviews and auditions new actors.

To handle that task from the Berkshires, she relies heavily on Internet video conferencing and chat technology that carries pictures and sound live online.

"I can be in Great Barrington and interview and audition actors who are located in Los Angeles or New York or anywhere else online," she said.

She also relies on her staff in Los Angeles to handle personal contacts and in-person meetings.

Jenny added that Berkshire County is also conveniently located for her work with productions and clients who are based on the East Coast, because of its proximity to New York and Boston.

In addition to casting, Jenny is also continuing to work in the development of projects for film and television. Among other projects, she developed concepts that have included reality programs on the HBO and AMC cable channels. "My goal is to do more with program development," she said.

Developing local talent pool

In addition to her work outside the Berkshires, Jenny is working to help develop the local pool of talent in this region.

She has launched a new website (berkshirecasting.com) to serve as a centralized resource and database to match up performers and crew people with organizations and producers who are looking for talent and other personnel.

The site includes a database of resumes as well as a listing of audition notices and other relevant information. It is accessible to anyone who wants to use it to either find work or fill positions.

Jenny said the idea came partially from her experiences casting a commercial that was recently shot in Berkshire County, and her casting work on a short film called "Candy" that is being filmed here.

"There are a lot of talented people in this area, but it's very difficult to find them when you need to," she said. "There is no central source of talent. That gave me the idea of setting up an online database where performers can post their resumes and photos online to connect with people who are looking for talent."

She said there is no cost for posting a basic resume and photo. There is a small fee for those who wish to post a video or subsequently update their listing.

In addition, she is finalizing plans to offer workshops about the business side of performing. She will also offer workshops in auditioning techniques where she will critique performers. ♦