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The Story Teller

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For a big man, Phil Hettema speaks softly, yet wields a large imagination. He and his team at Pasadena's The Hettema Group, create unforgettable experiences that can thrill and amaze us while providing meaningful context to our most important cultural narratives.

If you ask Phil Hettema, the power of an experience lies in the story it tells. And the stories we tell ultimately, come to define us. But Hettema is no new-age thinker. He's an experience creator. Yes Virginia, "Experience Creator" really is a job title. Phil Hettema has been doing it for 40 years.

He and his Pasadena-based company The Hettema Group have told stories all over the world in countless different ways, from projects as diverse as the Russian-Jewish Museum in Moscow to Jurassic Park the Ride in Hollywood. Tapping artists and engineers, musicians, writers, architects and historians, Hettema brings a multi-disciplinary approach to these creative design projects. Whatever the project however, whether intended

to provide a big shot of adrenalin or a more subtle emotional, inspirational or educational experience, Hettema's goal is to bring people together.

There are only 50 or so firms in the entire world doing the kind of work Hettema does. His group has emerged from this rare company to win some of the country's and the world's highest profile commissions including the USA Pavilion for the World Expo 2012, the National WWII Museum in New Orleans and most recently, the One World Observatory experience at The World Trade Center in New York. So how does someone get into a field like "experience creation" that so few people even know exists?

While a student at California State University, Long Beach, Hettema, like many other students there, began working at Disneyland part time. Born essentially coincident with the park's opening, Hettema had long believed Disneyland was "the coolest place ever," but had never thought it would represent a possible career. Nevertheless, he stayed at

Disney for seven years.

"When I got there, I knew the (Disney) Guidebook by heart," he says. I try to imagine the fit and bearded middle-aged guy across from me, his long frame folded into a conference table chair, similarly aligned at his dorm room desk, absorbing the Disney Guidebook. Hettema's responsibilities grew quickly and when the Disney Bicentennial Parade rolled around in 1975, Phil Hettema found himself in charge of all the costuming for Disney's Bicentennial celebration.

After seven successful years at Disney, it began to set in that maybe there was a career in "experiences" after all. While his creative interests ranged from music to design, he nevertheless understood that he needed more formal training in order to advance what was now gaining form as a possible career. He also believed there was perhaps no better source of training than at Art Center College of Design in his hometown of Pasadena. So, he quit Disney and enrolled. "It was simply the best school I could imagine going to," he says.



THE HETTEMA GROUP

It wasn't entirely evident to Hetteema, but the quality of his imagination would not only validate that choice, but also cement his future. Immediately after school he went to work for Sid and Marty Krofft, the producers behind television's psychedelic 70s children's icons, H.R. Pufnstuf and The Banana Splits. From there, he went back to work for Bob Jani, who used to be the head of entertainment at the Disney parks. Jani it turns out, was the guy who invented the Disney Electric Light Parade and brought Radio City Music Hall back from the dead. He was also the guy set to produce the 1984 Olympic Games for Disney. That's right, Disney. It's not well known, but David Wolper, the ultimate producer of the uber successful '84 Los Angeles Games, stepped in only after the agreement between Disney and the Olympics fell through. Already on the ground and at work, Hetteema stayed on as a production supervisor for the opening ceremonies. Those ceremonies, and the games that followed, revitalized a moribund Olympic movement diminished by successive, municipal economic disasters. They also changed Phil Hetteema's life.

"It was a really special and magical thing to be a part of," he says now. "And after the Olympics I just continued doing big production things."

Soon, Universal Studios called and asked Hetteema to produce shows for their theme parks. "Even still at this point, I didn't really envision where all this might take me. I was really just enjoying the entertainment business," he says.

He became just the fifth person hired into the Design Division of Universal Parks. Ultimately Hetteema became the senior vice president of attraction, a position with responsibility for everything Universal did in the experience and attractions business. In his 14 years at Universal, Hetteema's accomplishments include Universal's Island

Of Adventure for which he developed the master plan, environmental theme and 15 major shows and attractions for the award-winning park.

But a rolling coaster gathers no moss, and Phil Hetteema is frightened more by the thought of stagnation than that of a big plunge. So, when it became clear that Universal, under its fourth owner in Hetteema's tenure, was entering a period of "maintenance," with no big projects on the horizon, it was only natural that he'd look over the edge, take a leap and launch his own company. Since his 2002 inauguration, Hetteema has never looked back. He describes The Hetteema Group as "a boutique experiential design firm." The 50-employee business is international, with the bulk of the perhaps 12 to 15 projects ongoing at anytime, being produced in Asia.

With Pasadena increasingly taking up the mantle of design and tech hub, and The Hetteema Group now over ten years in its current location—having expanded from one building to five—Phil Hetteema's choice of location seems wisely prescient. Despite the fact that he runs an international business, and spends a third of this time on airplanes, Hetteema remains wedded to Pasadena. "You know there's a lot of research that says creative companies can thrive better in communities that are open and welcoming and have that cultural richness," he says. "I think Pasadena absolutely fits that bill." Perhaps one day, Phil Hetteema will have the opportunity to tell Pasadena's story. The question is, where will he put the roller coaster?

