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THERE'S LIFE AFTER BLOCKBUSTER MOST WORKERS DIDN'T MOVE TO DALLAS, FOUND JOBS HERE

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From her cluttered garage-style office in the warehouse district of east Hollywood, Page Giacin reminisces about the office camaraderie at Blockbuster Entertainment, the company's global imperialism and the glitz of working in downtown Fort Lauderdale.

"I miss my friends and the culture of a company that was so well-liked and known," said Giacin, 27. "It was a great time."

Today, Giacin can be found implementing corporate strategy at Shower Doors & More, a wholesale supply shop perched between the FEC railroad tracks and the old homes on Hayes Street. While husband and co-owner Larry cuts aluminum and assembles shower doors for bathroom contractors, Page requisitions materials, takes orders and pays bills. All the while, she greets everyone who comes in the door.

Had everything stayed the same, Giacin would probably still be working in Blockbuster's communications department, writing store operations guides and merchandising manuals.

But on Nov. 1, 1996, the \$4 billion-a-year company dropped a bomb on its 1,000 headquarters employees: It was moving to Dallas.

The announcement blindsided the business community and local government. Their fears? High-paying jobs would be lost. Hundreds of homes would flood the market. South Florida would once again be tarnished as a home base for Fortune 500 companies.

“It's a significant loss to the community,” mourned the bigwigs at the Broward Economic Development Council.

But a funny thing happened on Blockbuster's way to Dallas: Only a third of its employees went along for the expenses-paid ride. The more they thought about sacrificing their homes, their friends and their winter-less lifestyles, the more expendable their Blockbuster careers became.

“I entertained the thought, but that's as far as I got,” said Mariesa McClafferty, 31, a Blockbuster spokesperson who took a job as director of corporate communications at Extended Stay America in Fort Lauderdale.

Blockbuster got its start in Dallas as a tiny video store chain, but was discovered and brought to Fort Lauderdale by H. Wayne Huizenga in 1987. Seven years later, Huizenga led the company's sale to Viacom Inc. and resigned as chairman. When his long-time colleague Steve Berrard jumped ship a year later, Viacom's allegiance to Fort Lauderdale was on shaky ground.

Dallas became the company's nirvana soon after Viacom hired an Arkansas native, Wal-Mart executive Bill Fields, as Blockbuster's chief executive officer. Fields said Dallas was more centrally located in the world than Fort Lauderdale. He said South Florida didn't have the

“high-tech environment” to carry Blockbuster to its next, higher-tech level of upgrading multimedia computers while still renting videotapes.

Where did they go?

By April, a majority of Blockbuster's 1,000 headquarters employees had decided to gamble on finding new jobs in South Florida's high-tech wasteland. From the executive chambers to the clerical cubicles, they left one by one. Here's a sampling of where some of the evacuees went:

* Brian Woods, chief marketing officer, now heads the marketing effort at Orlando-based Planet Hollywood.

* Scott Barrett, who ran Blockbuster's video stores in the U.S., is now senior vice president of technology at Republic Industries in Fort Lauderdale.

* Gale Butler, who headed Blockbuster's corporate affairs program, does the same thing at Republic.

* Mark Halacy, former head of human resources, now runs the personnel department for MCA/Universal Studios in California.

From conversations with Blockbuster alumni, a high percentage of those who stayed in South Florida landed on their feet. Some, like Giacin, used the opportunity -- and severance pay -- to start their own business. Some wound up with fancier titles and higher salaries at local companies.

Patricia Tatham, for example, went from director of general accounting at Blockbuster to vice president and corporate controller at Extended Stay, a hotel chain founded by Huizenga. Kent Nance went from director of purchasing operations at Blockbuster to assistant controller at Precision Response in Miami. Dale Huber gave up a purchasing job at Blockbuster to become director of finance and administration at Front Row Entertainment, another Huizenga company that owns SportsChannel.

A win-win situation

Coty Fournier likewise found her career accelerated by Blockbuster's departure. She had been with the company 1-1/2 years and was its national construction manager when she parted ways in May. Today, at the age of 29, she is vice president of business development for Miller Construction Co. in Fort Lauderdale.

Fournier said Blockbuster's move to Dallas created a win-win situation for her and others, but being a big fan of water sports -- she owns a 31-foot Tiara cabin cruiser -- tilted her toward staying in Florida.

"I probably would have predicted staying at Blockbuster a good three years, but not necessarily a lifelong career," Fournier said. "I was very interested in working there because I was able to learn from all the entrepreneurs there."

Others, like Doug Schwab of Coral Springs, owes his start as a small-business owner to his former employer. Schwab bought movies for Blockbuster and loved the company, but he couldn't justify uprooting his wife and two children. So, in June he formed his own film distributorship, Maverick Entertainment.

"I go to film markets and talk to independent film producers, then I make a bid or deal to distribute their movies in the U.S.," Schwab said. "Video is my life, and I wanted to do something in the video business."

Not everyone who bailed from Blockbuster felt compelled to rejoin the corporate rat race. Gerald Geddis, its former president, is happily unemployed in Fort Lauderdale. So is Adam Phillips, the former general counsel.

Not all rosy in Dallas

Ironically, the CEO who steered Blockbuster to Dallas never made it past the Mississippi. Bill Fields was ousted in April, victim of slumping earnings and the wolves at Viacom's door. He was plucked from the jobless line by Hudson's Bay Co. and made CEO of Canada's largest department store chain.

At least he has a job. In September, Blockbuster laid off 65 people in its Dallas headquarters, including some higher-ups who had trekked in from Fort Lauderdale and planted roots in Dallas. Among the victims: Jonathan Baskin, senior vice president of corporate communications.

Such news elicits a sigh of relief from people who took a pass on the Dallas move. Instead of having to hunt for work, Page Giacin takes comfort in knowing that there is a demand for shower doors. And in spite of the loss of her fellow workers at Blockbuster, she now has the freedom to wear jeans to work, to bring her year-old baby to the office and to go home when she wants to.

"It's a little rough right now because we're having to put so much into the business," said husband Larry Giacin. "but it's going to pay off in the end."

WHERE THEY ARE NOW

BRIAN WOODS: Blockbuster's chief marketing officer now heads the marketing effort at Orlando-based Planet Hollywood.

GALE BUTLER: Headed Blockbuster's corporate affairs program, now does the same thing at Republic Industries.

GERALD GEDDIS: Blockbuster's former president now is happily unemployed in Fort Lauderdale.

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LONNIE TIMMONS III / Herald Staff OPENING NEW CAREER DOORS: Page and Larry Giacin own Shower Doors & More, a wholesale supply shop in Broward. In her former work life, Page worked in the communications department at Blockbuster -- until the company moved to Dallas. They used the opportunity to start their own business.

Caption:

color photo: Page and Larry Giacin own Shower Doors & More (a);

photo: Gerald Geddis (n), Brian Woods (a), Gale Butler (a)

Memo:

see WHERE THEY ARE NOW at end of text

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