

Engineering detoured by design

By Ann Therese Palmer

Special to the Tribune

Growing up in Dearborn, Mich., the city that also is home to Ford Motor Co.'s headquarters, Tom Schlegel thought that's where he'd spend his career.

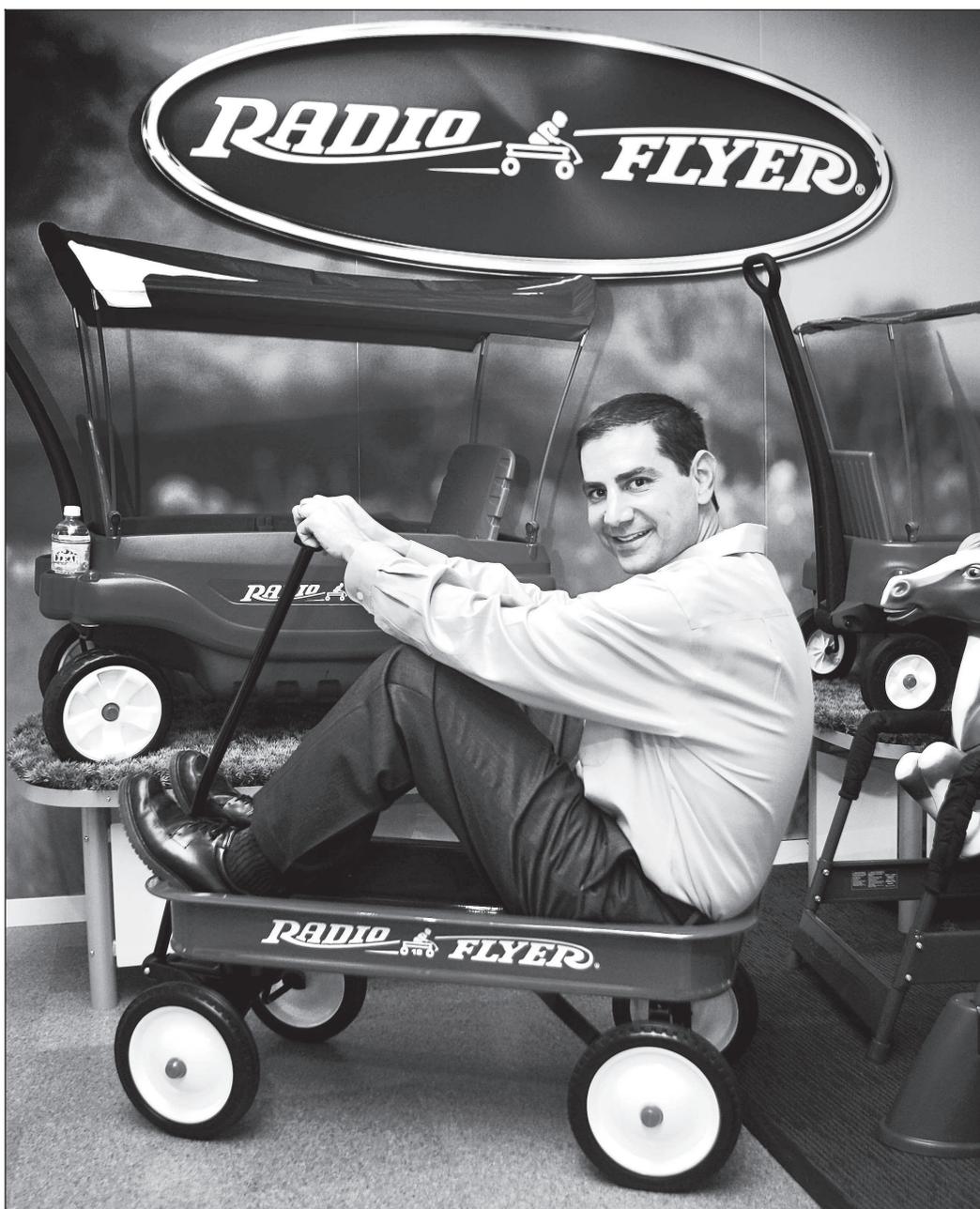
"I wanted to be a product planning engineer at Ford," said Schlegel, whose father was Ford's power products divisional manager. "I loved cars and was very mechanically inclined."

When he was 11 years old Schlegel wasn't content with his go-cart's top speed of 4 to 5 m.p.h. So he bought some lawn mower engine rebuilding books and tinkered with the motor until "it could really peel rubber — 25-30 m.p.h.," Schlegel recalled.

But, toward the end of his sophomore year in engineering at Notre Dame, Schlegel said he became "bored. Engineering was too theoretical."

Then one day while waiting in the fine arts building, Schlegel said he noticed a display case with garden tools, designed by industrial design majors. "I didn't know what industrial design was, but immediately I knew that's what I wanted to do," said Schlegel. He switched to a combination five-year dual-degree program, adding the industrial design major in the Arts and Letters College.

Now 40, Schlegel is product development vice president at Radio Flyer, the Chicago-based toy manufacturer.



Tribune photo by Abel Uribe

Tom Schlegel, product development vice president at Chicago-based Radio Flyer, sits in one of the toys at the company's showroom. He once was going to work on a different vehicle.

Q Was spending the fifth year to add industrial design worth it?

A Absolutely. Before I graduated, I applied for my first patent. In building a loft in our dorm room, I became frustrated with bending nails while trying to pull them out.

We didn't have a car to go off campus to purchase new nails. So I designed a claw hammer that could pull a nail straight out of a board, so the nail could be reused. Today I've got 10 patents.

Q After graduation, why didn't you work for Ford?

A At Ford, I'd only have been designing one car component. After majoring in product design, I realized there's a substantially higher feeling of satisfaction when you design the entire product.

Q If you had to relive your career path, would you change anything?

A After graduation, I went to Lever Brothers. I supervised and troubleshot installation of high-speed packaging equipment for the Lever 2000 bar soap.

Step by step

2003-present: Vice president, product development, Radio Flyer Inc., Chicago

2000-03: Vice president of business development, The Marketing Store, Lombard

1999-2000: Assistant vice president of product design and development, The Marketing Store, Westmont

1998-99: Director of product design and development, The Marketing Store, Westmont

1997-98: Engineering manager, MB Sales, Westmont

1996-97: Senior project engineer, MB Sales

1994-96: Project engineer, MB Sales

1993-94: Production supervisor, Lever Brothers, Hammond

1990-93: Project engineer, Lever Brothers

1990: Bachelor's degrees in mechanical engineering and industrial design, University of Notre Dame

1989: Engineering intern, Lear Seating Co., Southfield, Mich.

1988: Student painter, University of Notre Dame

1985-87: Summer painter, carpenter and handyman, Dearborn, Mich.

1984: Detailer, Tidy Car, Allen Park, Mich.

Three years later, I was promoted to production supervisor, managing production line operations. I wasn't happy. I was getting further away from design.

To change jobs, I thought I'd have to get a master's [degree] in design. I didn't want to take on the debt, while putting my career on hold for two years. So I started reading the classi-

fieds. That's where I found the job at MB Sales.

Q What's that?

A MB Sales manufactures Happy Meal toys for McDonald's. Nine years ago, it merged with The Marketing Store, a sales promotion company, and now operates under that name.

I started as a product engineer. Eventually I was promoted to vice president of business development, responsible for selling our product design services to other clients like General Mills, Hasbro and Ohio Art.

Q How did you get to Radio Flyer?

A Robert Pasin, Radio Flyer's president and a Notre Dame graduate, was looking for a product development vice president. Looking for engineers with my level of experience, Robert checked the Alumni Association's directory on its Web site.

He saw my job title, got my home telephone number from the site and left a message at my home. I was happy in my job, but thought talking to Robert would be an opportunity to sell him on our product design services.

The more I learned about Radio Flyer, I realized the opportunity to design products for an iconic American brand doesn't come along every day. So I joined the firm.