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Special Report - Breakaway: Focus on Small Business

Brady Bunch to Computer Wizard

By E. THOMAS WOOD and TODD W. CARTER

Television has been good to Christopher Knight. And not just in the way you'd think for a child star.

As Peter Brady, middle brother in "The Brady Bunch," Mr. Knight spent much of his youth in the role of heartthrob for millions of preteen girls. The happy-family sitcom, in which he co-starred from 1969 until 1974, is enshrined in American lore as one of the most popular television shows of all time, and now has an afterlife on cable television.

But today, at 42 years old, Mr. Knight is involved with TV in a much different way. A well-established high-tech entrepreneur, he has brought to market a series of accessories designed to make ordinary computers function like televisions and VCRs.

The company he co-founded, Eskape Labs Inc. of Pleasanton, Calif., has won critical praise for its "MyTV" line of Macintosh video accessories. Ryan J. Faas, a Mac hardware expert reviewing "MyTV" for About.com in November, said he was "completely astonished" by the product: "It was as though the iMac I was testing this on had been replaced completely by a 15-inch television set." The

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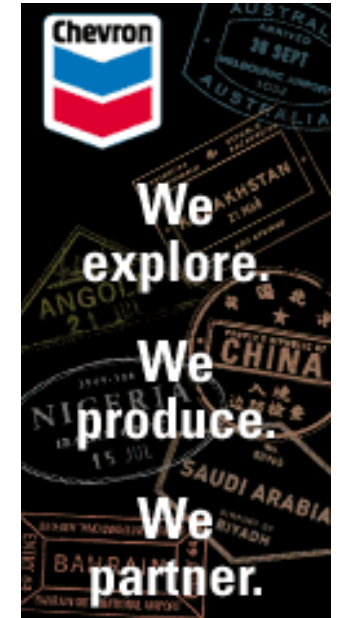
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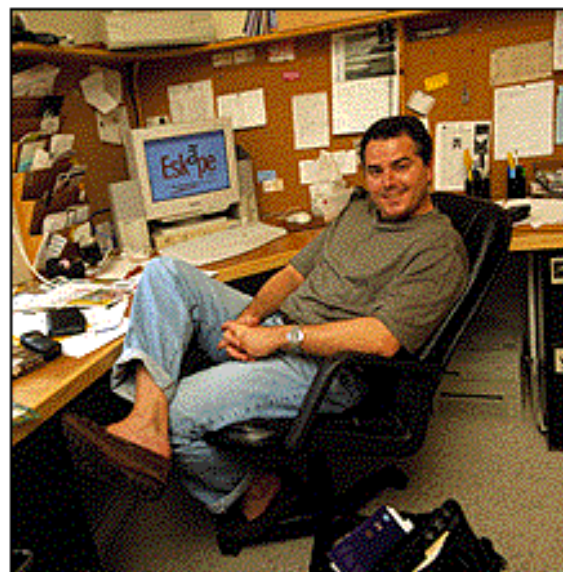
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product's potential to catch on with consumers is "big, big, big," boasts Mr. Knight, with enthusiasm reminiscent of Peter Brady himself.

The entertainment business turned out to be a worthwhile training ground for Mr. Knight in a variety of ways. Nobody in Hollywood expects a job for life, and so it has been no big deal to Mr. Knight that his computer-industry career has featured six job changes between 1989 and 1998. But during that time he managed to rack up exponential sales increases for several companies (he says he took one company from sales of \$400,000 to \$4.2 million within 10 months) making a name for himself as a marketer and not just a former TV star.



Robert Sebree

Christopher Knight

When Mr. Knight and his partners founded Eskape Labs in November 1998, they quickly encountered typical challenges. The hardware company needed venture or "angel" capital, but it seemed as though all Silicon Valley investment money was going into Internet start-ups.

In an interview last October, Mr. Knight lamented, "We're beyond the angels. We're looking for a savior."

Recently they found one. As the revived Wall Street credibility of [Apple Computer](#) made the Mac peripherals business newly attractive, Eskape Labs won the affections of [Hauppauge Digital](#) Inc., a publicly traded maker of computer-video products based in Hauppauge, N.Y. On Jan. 3, Hauppauge Digital announced its intention to acquire Eskape Labs' assets for an undisclosed amount of cash and stock.

Mr. Knight says he will stay on in his marketing role as Hauppauge Digital makes the Eskape Labs video products available through its world-wide sales force. He and the sales force have their work cut out for them.

"MyTV" and related products developed by Eskape Labs face ample competition,

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as digital video camcorders and other video products that connect to the Mac's "FireWire" port have been extremely popular lately. But FireWire ports are fairly new and aren't included in all Mac models. "MyTV" connects ordinary analog camcorders to the Mac through the more widely available USB port, sacrificing some picture quality for economy.

"It's certainly not as high in quality," Mr. Knight concedes, "but it's much less expensive than the other options out there."

For Mr. Knight, the transition from teenage dreamboat to high-tech mover and shaker involved a few detours and false starts. Though he and the other Brady cast members have avoided the tragedies that have befallen some former child stars, he had to remake himself after he finished working on the TV series at age 16.

He had never felt committed to acting as a career -- "I was pushed into it. It wasn't my idea," he says. And a stint as a casting agent convinced him once and for all not to rely on the entertainment business for a living. Though he has appeared in various Brady Bunch revivals and other films in the past two decades, he stopped actively looking for show-business work long ago.

Friends talked him into sinking money into their small-business ventures when he was in his 20s -- investments that turned out to be mistakes. Fortunately, Mr. Knight had plowed much of his Brady earnings into Southern California real estate, which significantly appreciated until the bust of the early 1990s when, he says, he "got rocked pretty good."

Mr. Knight began to take an interest in computers in the late 1980s. Though he lacked technical knowledge, he presumed: "If I did double time for six months, I'd probably catch up with everybody else, because it's all changing every six months."

But he deemed his past a burden. "It was a hindrance psychologically for me at the very beginning," he explains. "I was afraid people wouldn't take me seriously."

Quickly, though, he overcame those doubts. Today, Mr. Knight bristles at the idea of using his old fame to open doors in business. "They buy me because of the same reason they buy the guy in the next seat -- because I get the job done," he says. "Not because I am Peter Brady. If I sold that, I'd be out of a job in three months, because it's not going to have any legs."

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