

## Serial builder

### Rob Fox is an entrepreneur who helps create a thriving climate.

**Bethany Clough The Fresno Bee**

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Rob Fox's path is one that many entrepreneurs hope to take: start a business, handily compete with national chains and find a way to move on to other ventures.

He built a string of party stores and **toy** stores in the Valley over 15 years. Four of Fox's PartyWorks stores in the central San Joaquin Valley recently converted to Party City franchises, a deal that made him the franchise owner.

He said the move allowed him to spend significantly less time on the business, freeing him up to focus on his two **Professor Toy** stores in Clovis and Visalia.

Such "serial entrepreneurs" drove Silicon Valley's success, said Tim Stearns, executive director of the Lyles Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at California State University, Fresno.

They go from project to project, capitalizing on past knowledge, talent and skills to build another company, he said.

The Valley has other serial entrepreneurs, including John Shegerian, who founded and sold FinancialAid.com in a deal valued at \$15 million and has since founded the Electronic Recyclers International and Addicted.com.

In the restaurant industry, chef Roy Harland started Slaters and Belana, after selling Harland's restaurant, and he has been involved in several other restaurants.

Fox may be following in their footsteps. He started working in the party business in 1989, after leaving the Navy. An air traffic controller, he was awaiting word on a job from the Federal Aviation Administration when he took a part-time job as a stock boy at the independently owned PartyWorks store in Visalia. His then-girlfriend worked there, too.

He never got the FAA job, and over the years took over much of the ordering at PartyWorks. He subsequently married his girlfriend and opened his own store, PartyMart, in Bakersfield in 1993. In the year that followed, Fox bought the Visalia store and opened stores in Clovis, the River Park area on Blackstone Avenue and on West Shaw Avenue. Each store also had a SchoolWorks component featuring teacher supplies. The last store he opened was 1.7 miles away from an existing Party City store.

His secret?

"Halloween has been the key over the years," he said.

Sales of vampire costumes, werewolf masks and other Halloween products helped pay for other stores, he said.

The average amount spent on Halloween has grown 45% over the last six years, as adults spend more on costumes for their children, themselves and even their pets, according to the National Retail Federation.

In January, Fox took the next step in his evolution to serial entrepreneur. He signed a deal to convert his Visalia, Clovis and Fresno stores to the Party City name. Fox now pays royalties to

New Jersey-based Party City, which owns 500 stores nationwide and in turn is owned by a large international holding company.

He declined to give financial details of the agreement, saying only, "It was a great deal for both of us."

Party City takes care of all the marketing and ordering and provides the "Dora the Explorer" and "Pirates of the Caribbean" signs over the shelves.

"We just changed the name, and I don't have to reinvent the wheel," he said. "I don't have to think as much anymore."

And Party City benefits because it doesn't have to start from scratch building new stores, testing the market and familiarizing customers with its brand.

"They aren't going to buy if they don't think it's already a pretty serious, well-developed, well-running operation," Stearns said.

The International Franchise Association does not track how often independent stores are bought by larger franchised companies. However, the practice is more common in the service sectors, such as with mechanics, said Alisa Harrison, association spokeswoman.

As part of Fox's deal, the Party City store at Shaw and West avenues in Fresno closed. Fox's store remains open at Shaw near Brawley Avenue under the Party City name.

Fox is selling his SchoolWorks merchandise in his **Professor Toy** stores, alongside educational **toys**. The products weren't part of the deal.

He said he hopes to establish a niche by selling **toys** that Wal-Mart and **Toys "R" Us** don't. That strategy helped him last year, when recalls on many **toys** made in China scared off customers. Many of the more educational **toys** are made in Europe, said Fox, and the customers came seeking those types of **toys**, he said.

He plans to sell **toys** online through ProfessorToy.com this summer and is planning a warehouse and corporate office in Visalia for the online component.

Fox also hopes to open another **Professor Toy** store in north Fresno.

If successful, Fox could continue the path he took with the party stores, Stearns said.

"You should always be positioning yourself with the opportunity for someone to come in and cash you out," he said. "That's where you reap the rewards."

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