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THE BOSS

## From Drumrolls to Designs

By PETER CLARKE

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WHEN I was a senior in high school, a recruiter from the Marines contacted me. I was questioning what I wanted to do with my life, and my parents were pressuring me about the same thing. I thought I might become a professional musician, but I lacked the commitment.



Peter Clarke is the founder and C.E.O. of Product Ventures, a product and packaging design agency in Fairfield, Conn.

**AGE 47**

**HOMETOWN** Westport, Conn.

**NAME OF HIS BOAT** Perfect Package

The recruiter called on the right day and said the right things. I never knew that I could have a job in the Marine Corps and that they would send me to music school as well. Enlisting sounded like a good idea, especially since my father and uncle had been in World War II and my grandfather had fought in World War I. I felt I was next in line.

I had taken drum lessons in junior high and formed a band with a friend who played keyboards. Rock groups such as REO Speedwagon were popular at the time, but I had discovered jazz fusion, a mixture of jazz and funk. We challenged ourselves with arrangements that were technical and enjoyed breaking out into solos that allowed free expression.

After enlisting, I had to audition for the Marine band, which has extremely high standards. I was accepted, attended music school for six months and was ultimately assigned to the Fleet Marine Force Pacific Band, now called the U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific Band.

I often played the snare drum. Once we played at a ceremony at Camp H.M. Smith in Hawaii. It was very formal, with troops lined up on the parade ground and a 21-gun salute. A number of dignitaries were present. As the band marched past the review stand, my drum strap became unhooked and my drum fell and rolled across the field. I marched on as if nothing was wrong.

The Marines, and particularly boot camp, gave me the confidence to achieve, so when I finished my tour of duty I enrolled at the University of Bridgeport to study industrial design. When I was in high school, my father tried to tell me I'd be good at design. He was an art teacher, and my grandfather was a master cabinetmaker. My dad said I had their artistic ability. He reminded me after I served with the Marines.

After graduating in 1990, I worked for two industrial design companies, Teague and then Group 4 Design. But I had the entrepreneurial fever, so in 1994 I started my own firm, Product Ventures. I was 29.

I couldn't obtain a bank loan anywhere, so I applied for 13 credit cards. If I needed supplies, I'd pull out each card, one by one, until I could find a card that hadn't reached its limit. I was working six days a week, often until 3 a.m., and rarely got out of my pajamas. On days I had to deliver my designs to clients, I'd hire a friend's brother to drive me so I could sleep for a couple of hours in the car.

I may have pushed myself too hard, because I became ill with Type 1 diabetes, which is usually diagnosed in childhood. My doctor is puzzled why I got it at the age I did. I now inject insulin.

Today, we have close to 50 employees and have designed products and packaging for brands including Heinz, Folgers and Febreze. In 2000, we redesigned the packaging for Duracell batteries used in hearing aids so the batteries would be easier to insert. Through our research, we found that consumers with failing eyesight and reduced dexterity were fumbling during this task. We turned a tab on the packaging into a handle so that consumers had an insertion system.

In December, I returned to Hawaii after 25 years to attend a ceremony commemorating the 70th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. My cousin is starting a beer company, Home of the Brave, that honors the military, and I'm helping him. The project combines my interest in World War II history and my passion for design.

*As told to Patricia R. Olsen.*

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