

Niels J. Nielsen and the Vacuum Tube Collective

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After spending a few days with Niels Nielsen, I needed two things. Time to process the very powerful spirit I had just encountered and a larger word count. Rumors of Niels J. Nielsen float around Corvallis like the adult version of Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Some stories seem outlandish and at times certainly too extravagant to be real.

What are some of these rumors, you ask? Nielsen, commonly referred to as the pioneer of inkjet technology, was rumored to be well-known around Hewlett-Packard in Corvallis for wearing a different hat to work every day, as well as driving an old Cadillac hearse to work for years—the list goes on. The word that seems to roll off the tongue of anyone speaking these tales is “eccentric.”

After contacting Nielsen, he invited me to the weekly meeting of locals in his garage known as the Corvallis Vacuum Tube Collective. “We tinker with vacuum tubes, chortle like a pack of maniacs, and drink whiskey shots while making loud and sometimes rude noises,” he stated in the midst of his invitation. How could a classy girl like me turn that down?

Nielsen’s garage is the place of every gear head’s dream. It is full of amplifiers, instruments, tools, old airplane dials, speaker heads, belts, and pieces and parts to just about everything. The Vacuum Tube Collective shuffled in at whatever time was best for them. The group was diverse in age, occupation, and style. Seemingly not people that would spend a great deal of time together—though they shared one thing in common: Nielsen. Music was played, people chatted about various topics, and others brought gear in and out for people to try. At one point in the night, a young man came in with a broken amplifier and the group quickly

postponed all activities to gather around the broken piece of equipment, looking for the problem. Through the night the stories flowed like the whiskey and the laughter could only be temporarily drowned out by the bass which shook the furniture.

If you are interested in joining the collective, there are a few requirements. You must choose a Slovak name. You must also treat the mascot DiDi Gospodinova with the upmost respect. DiDi, who is known to sometimes catch a ride home in unsuspecting newcomers' backseats, keeps an eye on the Collective. You must be willing to have a good time.

Is That Even Legal?

The next day Nielsen arrived for his interview in class Nielsen style, on his Death Bike. The Death Bike is an altered motor bike that Nielson built for an art show. The building of the bike took only a month, and grabs the attention of anyone around when he rides into town, including the police. Nielsen states he has only been pulled over once and the police officer simply asked for a picture and let him on his way. Despite its appearance the bike cannot fly, though Nielsen reports perhaps catching an inch or so of air off a speed bump on 2nd Street at one point. During the interview it's hard not to be distracted by the number of people taking pictures of the Death Bike, or talking about it so close to where we are. Nielsen explains that although the bike is art, it is fun. If ever he is having a bad day he can ride the bike downtown and have a cup of coffee and take pleasure in people laughing at the contraption and taking pictures with it.

Most of the parts on the bike are from Nielsen's garage, thrift stores, or Habitat for Humanity. Although he made an attempt to sell the bike at one point to pursue the idea for his next project, the potential buyer wanted to dismantle the bike and "take all the fun out of it," which Nielsen would not stand for. "The point of the bike is to have fun; you can find an old bike anywhere," Nielsen stated in disgust at the thought of someone dismantling the work of art. In many ways the bike seems to encompass Nielsen's spirit. It is practical, as it provides a mode of transportation, but with a sensible flair that makes your day just a little better.

The Man Behind the Myth

Eccentric is an adjective describing a person or behavior that is unconventional or slightly strange. This is a term that seems to follow Nielsen. When asked how he feels about the label, he explained that he owns it. Although some social stereotypes have given the word a negative connotation, Nielsen is a prime example of eccentric success. He defined eccentricity as "not caring what people think about you." Nielsen states he has gotten used to the label and that during his early years at Hewlett-Packard his eccentric ways were embraced. He was lucky enough to work with managers who understood his creativity, and the creative process of the other engineers. When he was able to be himself and embrace his eccentric lifestyle in the workplace, he was extremely successful, landing the company 12 patents. Unfortunately the company changed its management style, stifling creative and non-traditional minds like Nielsen's.

People also describe Nielsen as inspiring. Nielsen went off to college at UC Davis to study engineering. He had very little money and no equipment, but he wanted to play the bass. This drove Nielsen to build his own equipment, starting his love for building musical instruments and gear. When he began building amps, there were no books on the subject; he had no mentors, and no real help. He was on his own to pursue his passion. It is this same passion that drives Nielsen to provide a space, tools, equipment, parts, and perhaps most importantly his friendship and knowledge to those with similar passions looking for all the things he didn't have. "I want to foster the creative passion in people; I want to be the mentor for them that I never had." Nielsen describes his Tuesday night meetings with the Vacuum Tube Collective as the highlight of his week, with the most satisfying aspect being his ability to enable people to pursue their passions. Nielsen has created a truly safe place for people of all styles to come and ask questions, experiment, and be themselves. He has essentially created the environment Hewlett Packard once had that allowed people to experiment and create without shaming the methods used to get results.

NPR correspondent Eric Weiner wrote a book about the happiest places in the world, and one place he studied was Iceland. When researching the capital of Iceland, Reykjavik, he found a few strange things. They produce more world-renowned poets than anywhere else in the world. While visiting there he found that was because everyone is encouraged to write poetry. They have a fable that they will erect a statue in the city square for the one person who does not ever write a poem. Because so many people are encouraged and given support, more people are likely to succeed. Consequently, more people are also likely to fail—however, failure is not really a concept in Reykjavik. If you tried, you succeeded. It is also not uncommon for people to have multiple careers. If they don't like being a banker, they might move on to become a social worker. Instead of being considered strange, it's welcomed.

Nielsen, who has Scandinavian roots, has seemingly created a very Icelandic culture right here in Corvallis. He has forgone stereotypes by not conforming, and embracing his eccentric title he has been able to succeed in many areas of life: engineering, art, music, socially, and so much more. By being unafraid of what people will think of him he has been unafraid to try new things, and has been successful. He has also taken this concept far beyond himself and extended it to his community, creating a culture of mentoring people's creative nature and encouraging them to pursue their passions. His manner is astoundingly modest and positive at every corner. Failure does not seem to be an option in the realm of Nielsen or those he mentors, not because sometimes things don't work out, but because if they tried then they have conquered.

When spending time at the Vacuum Tube Collective, although you may be in a room with many eccentric and intelligent engineers, they very well may be looking to the tractor supply salesman or janitor for an answer. In the sawdust-covered garage, under a shelf was a stack of plaques awarded to Nielsen for each of his patents. Where most engineers may

display them on a wall with track lighting, Nielsen wittingly refers to the tall stack as “plaque buildup.” This is not to say he isn’t proud of his work, but he has no intention of bragging or boasting. He simply wants to create, mentor, and do all the things the Vacuum Tube Collective allows him to do. “I look forward to those Tuesday nights all week,” Nielsen simply stated with a warm smile.

Words & Photos by Amy Rose-Simpson