

CEPro

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People Person

How did Indy Car racing, baseball and pizza help EDG earn top CEDIA and CEA honors? Find out on page 58

Bob Gullo, president,
Electronics Design Group

**Special
CEDIA
EXPO
Issue!**

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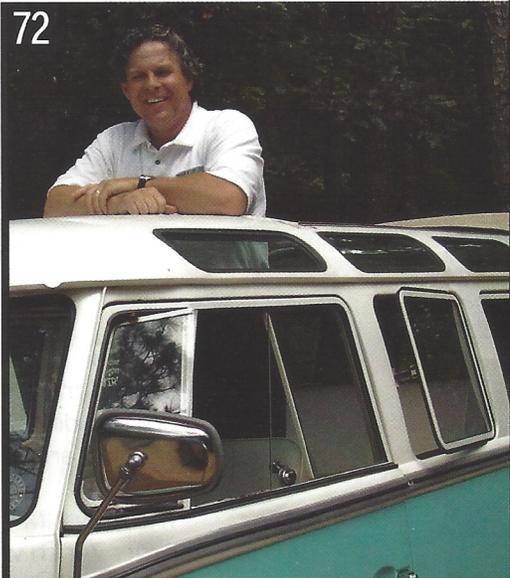
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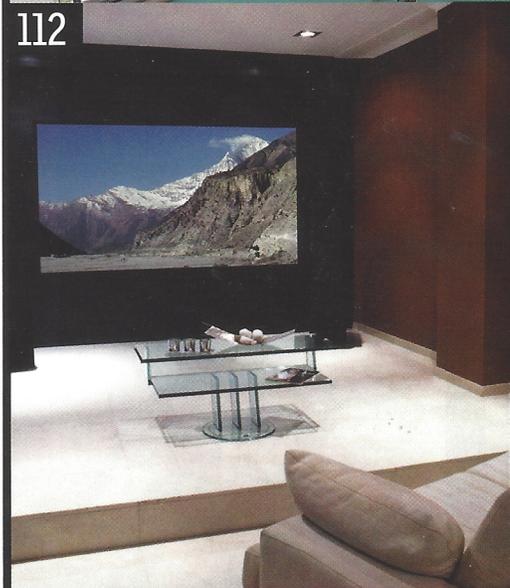
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Through apprentices and friendly relationships, Florida's Jim Gray Designs keeps it small, manageable and fun. BY JASON UNGER

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Mr. Nice

GUY

Through apprentices and friendly relationships, one installer keeps it small and still has fun. BY JASON UNGER

A lot of custom installation companies don't have many employees. But for one Tallahassee, Fla.-based dealer, his only full-time colleague is his wife. ■ Jim Gray, owner of Jim Gray Designs, has always wanted to keep a small business, and for the past 26 years, he's been able to do just that. "I knew I wanted a nice small company I could have fun with," he says. And even though manufacturers' representatives have told him that his approach to business is "nuts," it hasn't stopped him from doing what he knows works. ■ Gray started out like many other small business operators (SBOs)—working in a local specialty electronics shop as a floor salesman, making his way up to manager and part owner, until he decided to go out on his own and start a custom business. For the first six years of Jim Gray Designs' existence, it really was *Jim Gray Designs*, as he did all the work, including the behind-the-scenes paperwork. But around 1994, he realized that he couldn't do everything alone.

QUICK STATS

Jim Gray Designs

3304 Wildwood Trail
Tallahassee, FL 32312

Principal Jim Gray, Owner

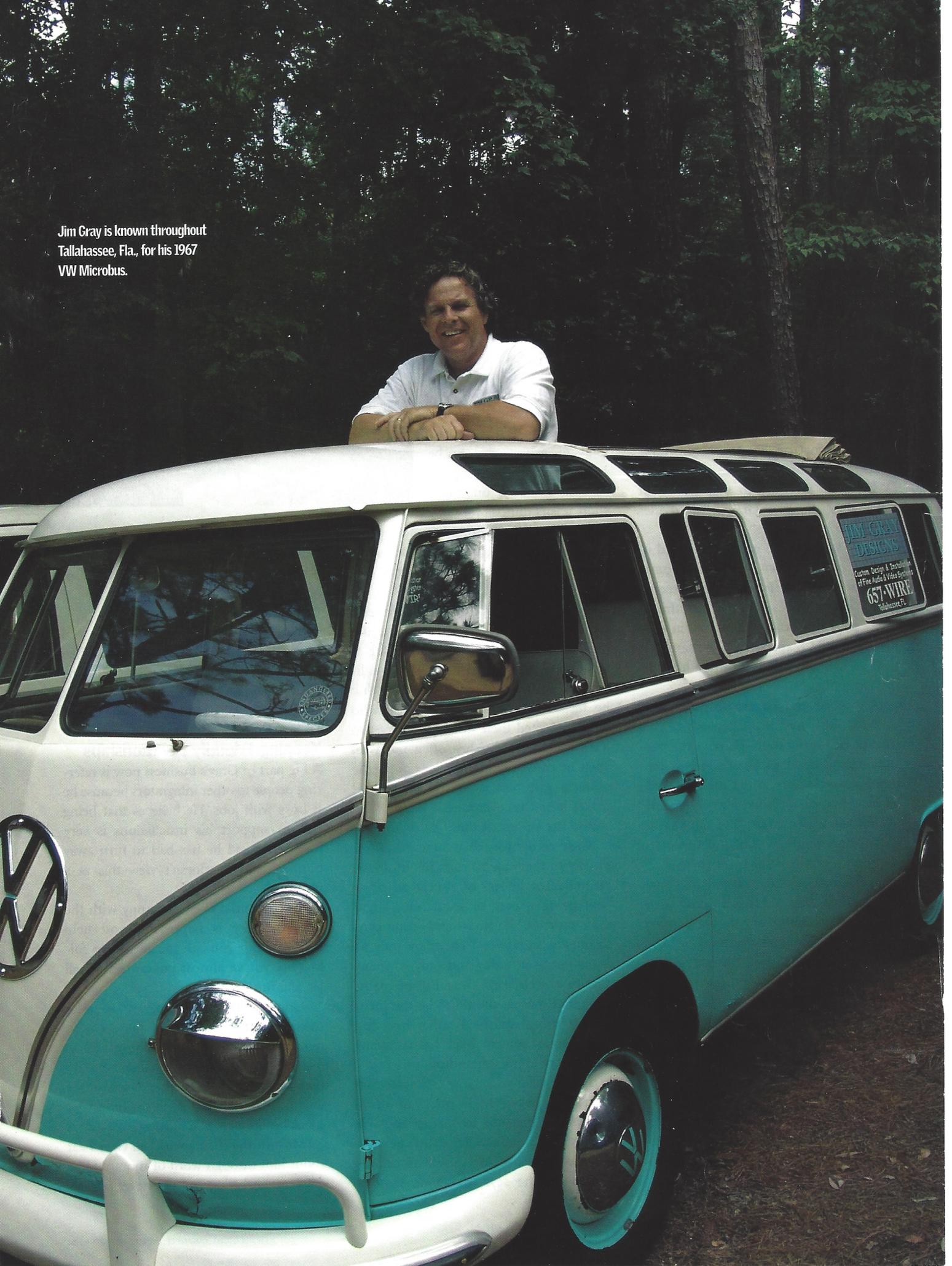
Revenue (2004) \$1 million

Gray Says We are nothing if not real—empty if not honest.

Specialties Home Theater and Distributed Audio



Jim Gray is known throughout Tallahassee, Fla., for his 1967 VW Microbus.



Friends & Family

So Gray developed a relationship with someone who also wanted to be a solo custom installer, who knew another solo guy, each with the goal of “doing their own thing,” he says. Gray took these installers under his wing, allowing them to use his storage facility and gain experience while acting as his subcontractors, selling his stuff and helping out on installations.

He’s taken on many installers over the years—as many as five at a time—and after he realized he needed some help, he’s never been without one. Gray calls these subcontractors “personalities.”

When a personality felt comfortable starting out on his own, he would. “When they’re ready to take that next step,” they do, says Gray. “It provides them safe haven.”

Gray says that he is not interested in leading people down a particular path, but that he gets satisfaction from seeing his personalities succeed. “In almost every situation, when they came in they had very little [experience],” he says, but they all had a “work ethic and a heart in the right place.”

A few of the relationships haven’t worked, but overall, Gray says, “It’s worked out really well.” He pays the personalities as much as he would pay normal subcontractors, some on an hourly basis and some on a fixed rate, depending on what they want. “I’ve felt that in that relationship ... you don’t want to have too much control [over them].”

When manufacturers heard of Gray’s relationships, they said that it would never work—*essentially training the competition*. However, a few manufacturers took a chance with him, and they haven’t regretted it. Jim Gray Designs generated revenue of \$1 million in 2004.

When working both the front-end and the back-end of the business, Gray was spending all of his days installing and all of his nights doing paperwork. He knew that couldn’t continue, so his wife Debra joined him in 1997, taking care of all the paperwork, including the proposals, payables, receivables, shipping and taxes. And it works well, as Gray says, “having

somebody you can put that love, trust and confidence in.”

He suggests that working with a spouse is a good way to begin a small company, but says that Debra has done an exceptional job. “I could certainly not have made it this far by myself,” he says. “The right help certainly is inevitable.”

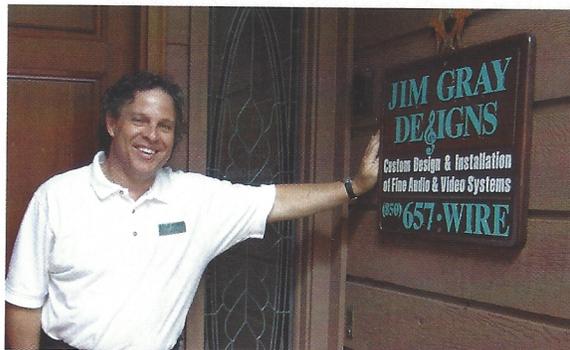
What’s in a Name?

When your name is also that of the company’s, customers tend to expect you to be involved with the business. And since he’s a one-man-shop, it isn’t difficult for Gray to be the face of his company. But he says that on early occasions when he would send a subcontractor out to a job, customers would ask, “Where’s Jim?”

He’s always there for an initial meeting and walkthrough with a client, and he’s there to make sure everything is right at the end, even if his “personalities” did most of the work. Gray says that he feels a responsibility to those who have entrusted their time and money to him. He always finishes off a job with what he calls “the hug.” For example, he sends a gift basket to the client and makes sure that everyone is happy. “I’m always the bearer of that,” he says.

Gray recognizes that there are a few pitfalls to the way he runs his business. He indicates the lack of a social aspect—“not being a part of something larger than yourself,” he says—and time constraints as negatives. “There are only so many hours in a day and only so many days in a week,” says Gray. But he maintains that money shouldn’t be the focus of everything, and he’d rather have fun and sustain control over his company than worry about expanding.

In a normal year, Gray estimates that he puts in about 4,000 hours of work, but the 47-year-old isn’t sure how his body will respond to all the time he’s put in. “I won’t know for years the sacrifices I’ve made,” he says, but adds that he



Having your name on your company leads consumers to expect you to be involved. This spec house (below) helped Jim Gray Designs earn \$1M revenue for 2004.

“absolutely loves work.”

Gray says it is tough without a real infrastructure to his company. When someone calls on a holiday, they’re calling for him, and he has to go out to work. “It’s certainly a price you have to pay,” he says.

Keeping Friendly Relationships

A big part of Gray’s business now is referring people to other integrators because he is busy with jobs. He believes that being able to support his installations is very important, and he has had to turn away business. But he doesn’t view this as a problem.

If a potential client is happy with the referral, Gray is happy. “If you help them, then if you can make time to follow up, you’ve almost guaranteed a call [in the future],” he says.

Gray credits his willingness to refer clients to other installers to the desire to remain friendly with other companies in the market. “I would want someone to do that for me,” he says, hoping to spread the wealth. “For many of us [in the industry], it has been more than a living.”

Most of the clients who call Gray hear about him through word of mouth, as he does no marketing and has never put ads

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in the newspaper or on radio or television. "We're not even in the yellow pages," says Gray, adding that this helps him control the growth of the company.

And as Gray has told manufacturers that he is going to slow it down in recent years, they've stuck with him, even though he expects to do less business. He has built strong relationships with manufacturers by never purchasing anything that he couldn't pay for when it came in.

The VW Microbus

While those in the industry may know Gray for the way he runs his business, residents of Tallahassee know him as the guy with the 1967 Volkswagen Microbus. Gray converted a turquoise and white Microbus into his work vehicle, and he built his business and brand around it. "I wanted something that had some personality," he says, and it helped him stand out. "There was not a Microbus in Tallahassee. You could see this thing coming from a mile away."

Though the Microbus wasn't always the most ideal work vehicle, Gray says it served him well. "It'll get you up to speed in less than a day," he jokes, but adds, "It's amazing what I could cram into that thing." The Microbus was retired in August of 2004, and Gray now uses a 2000 Volkswagen Eurovan, painted to look like the Microbus. He says that the unique vehicle was good for developing relationships.

Staying Small

For Gray, the opportunity to do what he loves is a great one. "It's been a wonderful ride," he says. And though he tells people that he's going to slow down soon, they know he can't stay away.

But he provides hope for those installers who want to remain small: It is possible. "You can start small and you can stay small," says Gray. By staying small, he enjoys his work and worries less. "You can have a great time and stay in control of your living all at the same time."

Even though Gray may or may not be retiring any time soon, he says that it's all about getting there. "It's about the experience. It's about the journey," he says. **CE Pro**

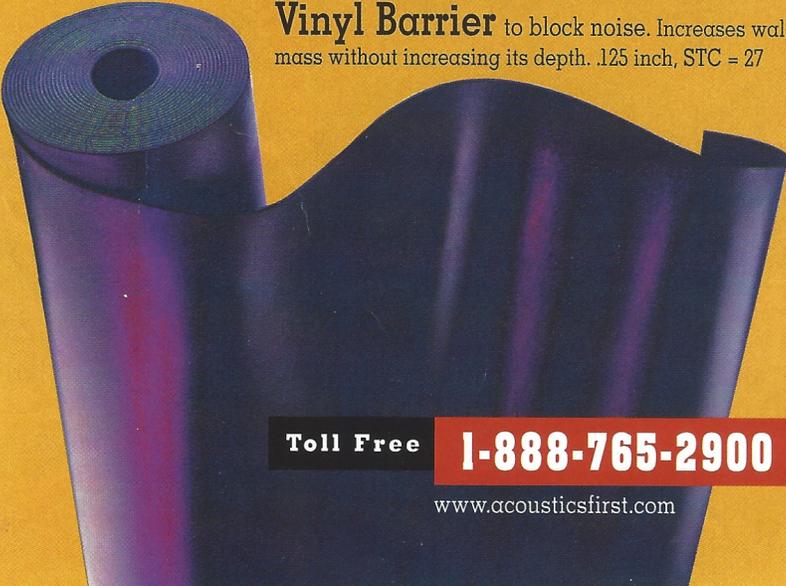


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