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Admen Bradley and
Bill Gast are piling up
the awards at their
Malvern-based agency.

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FRESH PERSPECTIVES: The brothers Gast have much in common but tend to look at things differently. Bradley (left) is the left-brain creative type; Bill (right) is the Wharton grad.

THE GREAT GAST BOYS

BY RICHARD RYS

With matching Porsches, motorcycles, and senses of adventure, Bill and Bradley Gast have driven their Malvern-based ad agency to new heights

THE BITTER ALPINE GUSTS PICK UP, BUT DANNY DUCHOVNY CONTINUES to plod upward along a glacier in the Swiss Alps, one bad step away from an icy death—and it's all because of Mangos. Unfortunately for the brother of actor David Duchovny, this is not an *X-Files* episode about some diabolical sentient fruit—that would mean there's a script and a soundstage with wind machines and fake snow. No such luck. It's November 2000, and Duchovny is in the middle of a freelance assignment, directing a TV commercial with a two-man production crew, a mountain guide, and the man who put him here: Bradley Gast, executive vice president of the Malvern-based Mangos advertising agency and the mastermind of this real-life cliff-hanger.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL CRAMER



HIGH ON THE HOG: At left, Bradley gives Bill a ride on his Ducati—in the old days, above, it was Bill who carried Bradley.

"YOU HAVE ALL THE BEST AGENCIES IN PHILADELPHIA," SAYS ONE LOCAL AD GURU, "AND THEN YOU HAVE MANGOS. THEY'RE THAT GOOD."

their "best work" as in "the quest to do the best work," and Bill's Rule #2, "Always do your best work" (ranking just behind "Get the job done"). Since this comes from two advertising execs who drive matching midnight-black Porsche 911s, it would be easy to assume it's all corporate B.S. But the Gasts back up their splashy graphics and earnest personal mantras with a business approach that's so conservative, it makes clients feel at ease acting cutting-edge.

Take Centre Financial Services, for example. In 1996, the global finance company asked Mangos to prepare its annual report, a document few would consider a fun read. After a month of preparation, the Gasts and their creative team met with Centre honchos and presented what they call a "Goldilocks approach"—in this case, four different ways the report could be designed, ranging from conservative to radical. "One might be a little too much, maybe one's not enough, and one we think is just right," Bill says. "But we never let them know what we're thinking. We let them decide. And sometimes they surprise us."

The same adrenaline rush Bradley felt on that Swiss glacier

Great Gast Boys

soared through him in the office when the suits from Centre made their choice: a heavy-stock book with pop-up graphics and illustrations inspired by pink Silly String and pinball machines, with a close-up of a wide-eyed toddler with spiked hair on the cover. When, as Bradley puts it, “you jump off the cliff and build your wings on the way down,” it helps to know the guy holding your hand has done it before. Bradley and Bill Gast are 50 and 55 years old, respectively, with decades of experience between them.

“In terms of the people,” Bill says, “this is probably a terrible way to say it, but I think we’re kind of a middle-aged company.”

“That’s a horrible way to say it,” Bradley says.

“Seasoned,” suggests senior vice president Annemarie Armstrong, who’s standing nearby.

“Seasoned,” says Bill, and nods.

ON A BREEZY SPRING AFTERNOON, Bill Gast wraps up a meeting with AmerisourceBergen in Chesterbrook and returns to the sterile confines of the Great Valley Corporate Center, a lifeless strip of car lots and cubicles seemingly designed to snuff out creative impulses. But step into the Mangos lobby, and you’ll think you’ve wandered into a big wooden horse that slipped past the business park’s security. While art from past campaigns hangs everywhere on red- and yellow-painted walls, the real centerpieces here are Bill’s fire-engine-red Ducati 916—an Italian motorcycle that tops out at 165 mph—and Bradley’s vintage 1967 BMW R69S, which he found in an old barn and spent thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours refurbishing. (They also own matching Ducati 996 SPSS.)

The reception area is furnished with two Wassily chairs—designed during the Bauhaus heyday and named after abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky—and a sleek Italian sofa. “Our whole gang goes into analysis out here once a month,” says Bradley, in jeans and Birkenstocks. His hair is business-length now, but a reddish beard fading to white hints at bygone Grizzly Adams days. Bill walks in minutes later wearing a denim shirt neatly tucked into his khakis, resembling Howard Eskin but with a soft, easy demeanor. Bradley is the Mangos left brain, the final say in creative decisions, while Bill, a Wharton grad, has the last word on bottom-line matters.

They have the credentials, but they’re clearly not the usual company men. As Bradley shows off the Mangos screening room, which is outfitted with \$50,000 in electronics, including a plasma television and

surround-sound, he asks, “Have you seen *Snatch*?” The film—a hip, bloody crime tale directed by Guy Ritchie, Madonna’s hubby—played in the office during a recent weekend Gast film fest. “The soundtrack is incredible in here.”

Not far from the screening room/movie house, in the creative department, is a four-foot-tall yellow rocket ship left over from a photo shoot. Then there’s the M&M paraphernalia adorning the filing cabinets outside Bill’s office—it started as a joke and led to his “collection,” as well as to a 32-pound-a-month staffwide candy jones. (“We should get a vendor’s rate,” Bill says.) And there are two showers, installed during a recent expansion, that are available to everyone but are probably used most often by the Gasts, after their frequent mountain-bike jaunts. Even an otherwise unassuming stretch of bare carpet in the production department serves a dual purpose when a senior account manager/spiritual adviser leads eight co-workers (including the Gasts, of course) in a weekly yoga session.

The theme-park atmosphere might sound like a throwback to the heady days of the Internet boom, where 22-year-olds enjoying multimillion-dollar windfalls stocked cavernous workspaces with Foosball tables and all manner of goodies. But the youthful air about the Mangos office owes more to the Gasts’ spirit than to actual youth. For some, “seasoned” might translate to “old”—or, worse, “stale.” The judges of the regional ADDY awards didn’t think so when they presented a Mangos-designed annual report for Centre with Best of Show Print honors in 2000; it beat out competition from A-list firms in New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. At least four current Mangos clients signed on as a result of the Centre pieces, and their accounts, ranging from a quarter of a million to \$5 million each annually, place Mangos among the area’s top 10 firms. “We knew about their work for Centre,” says Isabelle Welton, a former communications executive at Zurich. “We pitched agencies in New York and Europe, but Mangos was just so much better. [Other agencies] didn’t give you that ‘wow’ effect.”

Sometimes the effect is more “They’re crazy” than “wow.” Last year, Bill and his creative team went to Nashville’s Caterpillar Insurance with two fairly conservative plans for a business-to-business campaign, and one surprise, called “Obsessed.” “I looked away, and then all of the Mangos people had Buddy Holly glasses on, with tape in the middle,” says Caterpillar Insurance CEO and president Linda Turner. “They said ‘This is going to be a little different.’” Caterpillar loved the concept—“We’re so geeky that all we think about is insurance, so you don’t have to”—and

took a chance on it. Mangos took home more awards.

The big ideas kept getting bigger. For the Zurich campaign four years ago, TV spots were bolstered by an eight-page insert in the *Wall Street Journal* and a huge indoor billboard at Zurich International Airport. For the commercial, which ran in 16 different international markets in three languages, Bradley got the shot he wanted—on top of the world, virgin snow, pristine scenery—and more, since his snow-blown visage still graces the commercial and is used on the Zurich homepage, along with the campaign slogan, “Connecting here. To there.” For the first time in Zurich’s 130-year history, it had a corporate image that united its global divisions—and Mangos had produced a campaign that demonstrated its breadth. “The Zurich campaign really showed the full range of what we could do,” says Bradley. “It was a literal and figurative high.”

CREATING EXTREME ADVERTISING for the multinational corporate set didn’t seem to be where the Gasts were headed when they left their Lancaster County hometown of Akron, Pennsylvania—where locking doors was an afterthought. “If you were away and it started to rain,” says Bill, “your neighbor would not only take your laundry down, but would fold it.” When Bill and Bradley were kids, their father ran a trucking business that served area farmers, so the Gast boys, including younger brother Bruce, were often found working under hoods or on farms. “We spent a lot of time shoveling shit,” Bradley says.

Bill and Bradley both went straight from high school to the Philadelphia College of Art. Their parents wanted Bradley to go to law school, but they were supportive. Bill admits he was such a poor student that they were happy he made it to college at all. As the years passed, the brothers’ careers ran parallel but never intersected. Bill designed art to promote the movie *Woodstock*, became the art director for the Philadelphia *Bulletin*’s Sunday magazine, and branched out into marketing at Smith-Kline labs. Bradley worked at a host of ad firms and gained experience in media campaigns of every stripe, from Conrail print ads to the launch of the Uni-ball pen and the repositioning of the King of Prussia mall.

Then, in 1992, a friend of Bill’s told him that the Mangos family was looking to sell its graphic design company, which had been founded by Barbara Mangos in Paoli 15 years earlier. Bill jumped at the opportunity to be his own boss and, with his friend acting as silent partner, began to transform the 15-person operation into a full-service agency whose campaigns could stretch across media boundaries. “There are two ways of

change: evolution and revolution,” says Bill. “I’ve always chosen evolution, because it’s stable, predictable and reliable.”

After nearly five years of careful expansion, an opportunity presented itself, in typical Gast fashion. Every weekend, the brothers got together at Bill’s home in Ambler to wash their cars, go for a bike ride, and catch up on professional and personal matters. One Sunday afternoon in August, the conversation turned to Bill’s vision for Mangos. Bradley offered his ideas for what it could become; Bill knew that his silent partner was eager to retire and sell his share in the company. “All of a sudden, it was like Indiana Jones, when all the big things are coming together and you have one minute to drive the rod through and lock it,” recalls Bill. “All these things came together, and we were like, ‘We’re doing it!’”

When Bradley came on board, he brought with him a few clients and a former colleague who is now Mangos’ creative director. He also settled into a complementary role with his big brother. Bradley is direct and intense; Bill is more laid-back. Both are hands-on, working in the trenches with their staff.

Bill: “If we were the same, half the people in the company would be fed up—”

Bradley: “—with both of us all the time.”

Bill: “Now only half the people are fed up with one of us half the time.”

A CERTAIN LANCASTER VALLEY charm and roll-up-your-sleeves work ethic strips the gleam and gloss off the brothers’ ad-biz jargon and the accoutrements of success—the cars, the vintage motorcycles—that would otherwise seem like signs of a midlife crisis. “I’m going to tell my son Jacob to never trust a company that says it’s like family,” says Charles Smolover, who recently gave up a 16-year freelance writing career to join the firm. “A family can’t fire you. They never use the word ‘family’ here, but Bill said to me, ‘There’s going to be a time next year when Jacob is going to be in a school play, and you better be there. He’ll only be that age, in that play, once.’ I think he got a little misty-eyed. That’s when I thought, I’m glad I work here.”

The solidarity that binds the 40-some “Mangosians” seems to border on cult-like, but it’s a selling point for clients. “There’s a love there,” says former Zurich exec Isabelle Welton, who brought her current employer, EFG Private Bank, into the Mangos fold. “These are people you spend a lot of time with, and I actually enjoy their company.”

Despite the loose, friendly demeanor of its executives, Mangos isn’t Disney World, with a nine-to-five chock-full of M&Ms, bike rides and New Age midday breaks. “It’s the hardest place I’ve ever worked,” says Julie

Schmidt, who has spent more than two decades in advertising and acknowledges that everyone at the agency puts in weekend and late-night hours. “But it’s also the most rewarding. Bill and Bradley are always the first to say ‘Thank you.’” Better yet, the Gasts have been known to send around a cart with booze and snacks when stress levels reach critical mass late on a Friday night.

More evidence of the Mangos determination to make hard work fun lines the walls in Bill’s office, where the company’s holiday cards are displayed. When Bill purchased Mangos, he decided the annual card would serve both as a way to keep in touch with clients and as a tribute to employees. The first card simply spelled out “Season’s Greetings” using staffers’ head shots. But the project quickly escalated into an internal challenge to raise the creativity bar, with the only guideline being that every employee had to appear in the finished product. In 1998, the company handed out a flip-book with mix ‘n’ match photos of “the Mangos holiday

“I DON’T NEED THE GLITZ AND GLAMOUR,” SAYS ONE CLIENT. “I NEED THE GREAT WORK.”

misfits,” including a picture of Bill dressed head-to-toe in his shiny red motorcycle leathers. Another year brought a chocolate-scented card that looked like a Whitman’s Sampler map (“Bill Gast—solid chocolate square surrounded by nuts. Bradley Gast—just plain nuts.”)

The ante kept rising: an aluminum Christmas tree with head shots for ornaments; a full-size “Mangos Mania” board game featuring the now-infamous “Bill-Bradley Catch-22”—a lethal trap that sends players bouncing infinitely between the two brothers in search of project approval. “I had one friend who got ‘Mangos Mania’ and didn’t want to break the cellophane on it,” Bill says in a burst of laughter. “He didn’t want to lower the collectible value!”

This past year, Mangos produced “Harmony,” a CD-ROM puzzle game with pieces featuring the employees’ faces and staff icons such as red M&Ms and “the holy Ducati.” In May, the Mangos holiday in-house joke won a bronze pencil in the interactive category at the One Show advertising awards in Manhattan, finishing in a league with heavy-hitting campaigns for Nike and Mercedes. “It’s like someone putting six

cherries on your sundae,” says Bill. “We don’t do work to win awards, but when you’re recognized, it does make you smile.”

All projects, from holiday cards to million-dollar campaigns, begin with brainstorming, and there’s a room designed for just that purpose. When a new client comes aboard or an old client has a new problem to solve, its people and the Mangos brainstorming team—usually one of the Gasts and a handful of creative and account managers—hole up in the “think tank,” a conference room with wall-to-wall dry-erase boards and a cartoon of a fish leaping out of its bowl. Here they cover, wipe away and re-cover the walls with the “creative blueprint”: an outline of the client’s goals that all ad concepts must adhere to, and that serves as a common thread uniting each bowl of porridge in the “Goldilocks approach,” so there isn’t a wrong choice for the client to make.

The Gasts say the ideal Mangos client isn’t the company that needs warm bodies to execute a preconceived vision, but rather one that’s ready to explore a new look or identity but is unsure how to achieve it. “They don’t want to work for clients that say, ‘I need an ad tomorrow. Deliver it,’” says Jonathan McGrain, senior vice president of marketing services for Radian a global insurance agency. “There’s substance beneath the sizzle.”

“The best relationships are clients who *have* to change,” Bill says. “They’re number one and getting serious competition. They’re number five and can jump to number three if they take advantage of the competition. Or they’ve merged with somebody else and the cultures don’t fit.”

In the 10 years since the firm changed hands, Bill has more than doubled his staff and office space while cutting his client list by more than half, to its current roster of 17. “They match the creativity [of New York agencies] but don’t match the snobbery of Madison Avenue,” says Isabelle Welton. “I don’t need the glitz and glamour. I need the great work.”

Back in the screening room, Bradley dims the lights, then fumbles with the controls before cueing up a reel of Mangos television commercials. He and Bill settle in to show off their handiwork. The presentation kicks off with the Zurich spot, complete with Bradley’s cameo, followed by ads for Einstein Heart Institute, Settlement Music School, the United Way. Speakers set to rock-concert levels pound with background music and voiceovers as the Gasts sit silently. When the lights come on, Bill leans back in his chair and says, “All this from our stupid little office in a cornfield in Malvern.”

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MANGOS



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