

the GIECED

FOCUS ON SCIENCE & ENGINEERING:

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Driven by Design

Four Grove City engineers make R&D decisions daily at Honda, shaping the vehicles America loves to drive

When you're winding around that bend on a beautiful fall day, crisp leaves sent flying in your path, the blue sky and golden sun combining to make you breathe a little deeper, how important is it that the sounds coming from your car stereo have recital hall quality?

Michael Pilgrim '02 doesn't care if it's Andrea Bocelli, James Blunt or the Black Eyed Peas; it's very important.

Michael is one of four Grove City College alumni working as an engineer at the Honda research and development facility in Raymond, Ohio, near Columbus, which turns out the Honda Element, Pilot, Civic Coupe, Acura MDX and TL and TRX350 Rancher ATV. Along with Jon Polasky '93 and brothers James '00 and Nick '94 Robinson, Michael makes decisions every day that find their way into some of the most popular vehicles in America.

He works with other engineers at Honda on the

audio and electrical aspects of the vehicle. And they take quality seriously, so seriously, in fact, that Grammy Award-winning producer Elliot Scheiner has come on board to help. Scheiner, who has worked with such artists as Faith Hill and the Eagles, is an engineer in his own right, lending his expertise to Honda and Panasonic to create the most pure, most expertly tuned sound that can come out of a car's speakers.

"We follow his suggestions," Michael says, "in how things should sound based on his recording experience." The result is surround-sound quality with unique DVD-like purity.

All four engineers see their input take tangible shape in the vehicles on the market, in garages and on the highways today. One of the newest models introduced by Honda is the Ridgeline, the pickup

that won the "Motor Trend" Truck of the Year honor for 2006, an especially exciting coup for those in the auto industry. Nick and James worked extensively on the 2007 Acura MDX, the new sport utility vehicle introduced in mid-October, and Michael worked on its audio aspects as well. Jon, who has been at Honda the longest of the four, was a project leader for the 2007 Acura TL.

Just a few years ago, Michael was looking for a hands-on engineering job in the automotive industry. His alumni networking skills kicked in and he remembered that James was working at Honda R&D. He sent his resume and got the interview. After all, Honda was somewhat familiar with Grove City engineering grads. James had also used his networking skills, but this

time through family. Brother Nick started working at Honda two years after graduation, first getting experience as a process engineer in Cleveland, knowing all along that "this is what I wanted to do."

For James, Honda R&D was his first and third job after graduation. He left Honda for a two-year stint to work at an automotive testing company, but returned to the same department – engine research and testing – joining a different working group.

Jon was the first alum in the door at Honda. After graduation in '93, he didn't have a job and the market was slow, but he answered an ad and was hired into a quality group, where he stayed for seven years. Today, Jon works in the group that focuses on the interaction between the driver and the vehicle, including noise, vibration and harshness.

Nick was next to become a part of the Honda team, now working in chassis development and testing. He travels all over the world for testing and research and has been to Japan to use facilities there and to Europe for tuning tests and to visit tire plants. His areas of responsibility include suspension, handling and overall ride.

James, in the research realm, tries to figure out with his team members what the next new Honda vehicle needs to be and works to implement their ideas directly into the design. They look at prototype builds to see if the design reflects the concept and are primarily responsible for engine performance.

“It’s been much more rewarding and very empowering,” he says of the creative work environment.

His feelings mirror the Honda philosophy to take work as far as it can go and allow employees to work freely. At the core of the Honda philosophy is “respect for the individual,” encouraging initiative, equality and trust.

Jon adds that Honda puts a great deal of faith in the employee. In fact, the fundamentals of a new vehicle could come from an employee who’s been with the company for as little as five years. “You can control your destiny by initiative,” he says.

Certainly one aspect that pushes initiative into practice is the hands-on approach at Honda. Instead of suits and ties, the engineers wear white jumpsuits to be able to wheel



FROM LEFT, MICHAEL PILGRIM '02, JAMES ROBINSON '00, NICK ROBINSON '94 AND JON POLASKY '93 TOOK THEIR GROVE CITY EDUCATIONS TO HONDA R&D.

themselves underneath a car just as easily as any mechanic.

“Every one of us goes out and turns his own wrench,” Jon says. “Most meetings occur at the vehicle.”

Adds Nick, “It’s a very hands-on organization, which is very important to me.”

All four, along with other Honda employees, are charged with looking at the overall character of the vehicle, how it compares both with fellow Hondas and with other vehicles in the marketplace. Cars have personalities, just like people; some are sporty and strong, some are relaxed and family-friendly. And it’s up to the engineers to make that personality come alive.

All four also believe in their product. For example, Michael drives an Accord, Jon has a 2006 Civic SI and a Honda Odyssey minivan, “to

haul the kids,” James drives a ’95 Porsche 911 and Nick splits his driving time between two used Porsches and an Odyssey, “to haul the kids.”

But it’s not a requirement of the job to drive a Honda. “If you look at the parking lot out there,” says Nick, “it’s a mix of cars, and it’s good. Other makers have things they are very good at. We can always look to other vehicles for inspiration.”

And two of these engineers also didn’t follow the sometimes-common path of marrying Grovers. While Michael is married to Laura (Smouse ’04) and Nick married an alumna, Kristin (Jos ’94), Jon’s wife is Mindy and James just married his wife, Shana, on Sept. 2.

Grove City also came into play for more than relationship-building. All four reflect on their senior design

projects in the engineering department at Grove City. The in-depth, team-centered projects taught the young engineers a chance to work with others, meet deadlines, manage time, be creative and initiate cutting-edge technologies. Hardly a day goes by when these skills aren’t drawn to the forefront.

And much like the sigh of relief that came in the spring of their senior years, the engineers attest to the feeling of completion and a job well done after their blood, sweat and sometimes tears are poured into each vehicle.

Says James, “There’s a lot of pride and a sense of accomplishment when you see something you worked on in the marketplace.”

(Amy Clingensmith '96 is the Grove City College director of communications and GeDUNK managing editor.)