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A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside a tv set
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The story behind a Downtown warehouse's alluring enigma

The angular, three-story North Loop warehouse at 125 N 1st St. doesn't stand out because of its broken windowpanes or the still-erect rimless basketball backboard you can spy inside. It doesn't stand out because of the pale green moss and stilted weeds proliferating on its cracked concrete "court." It doesn't stand out because it's always locked tight and no one seems to be inside.

It stands out because of the silver television on a wooden stand just inside the warehouse's front picture window.

The television is on. It remains on, 24 hours a day. And it's not tuned to broadcast soap operas or cable movies.

This anachronistic beacon of technology often lures couples walking dogs, children on bicycles and other passersby, who stop at least briefly to peer through the plate-glass window at the TV screen. Some point. Others laugh, shrug their shoulders and move on.

What they're watching is a repeating series of photos, digital snapshots of winter sports and family vacations. No one interviewed on a recent Friday afternoon could even guess at the slideshow's purpose.

The single clue is a small block of text that appears once per slideshow cycle.

Media Center, it reads.

The warehouse is the property of Downtown businessman Jim Hillegass and his company, J. River. The building -- and the television -- is a part of the offbeat company philosophy and a part of the entrepreneurial spirit Hillegass said he's followed since he was a kid.

Hillegass's father Clifton founded CliffsNotes, the legendary yellow-and-black study guides/skimming shortcuts, in the basement of their Nebraskan home in 1958. It's where Hillegass, then 14, said he got his start in business, packing the books and later, when he could drive, delivering them to nearby Lincoln.

He moved to the Twin Cities as an adult and bought the warehouse in 1979 when the Commutator foundry moved out. In 1981, founded J. River, a computer software company.

The "J." is for Jim and "River" is for the nearby Mississippi, said Peter Sohal, the company's vice president of marketing.

The company's logo, a sketch of two men paddling a canoe on a river, is as unconventional and alluring as the warehouse. It's meant to be that way, a purposeful counterpoint to the modern, flashy logos employed by other technology companies.

J. River began by developing connectivity software, which improves communication between computers and software -- for instance, many computers successfully using a single network.

In 1999, the company expanded, launching Media Exchange, a software program dedicated to organizing audio files and automating the legal sale and distribution of music over the Internet.

Sohal said the product, which debuted a year before the illegal music-sharing program Napster's demise -- and before licensed sharing programs and lawsuits regarding downloaded music -- was ahead of its time.

This year, Media Center replaced Media Exchange.

It's has become J. River's flagship software program; based on its strength, Sohal said, J. River is now in partnership with Best Buy and another large company yet to be named.

Media Center is similar to iTunes for the Mac, and in the PC world, it competes with with Real Player and Windows Media Player.

Media Center is an all-in-one media organization program; users can manage audio and video files, as well as digital photos. It's loaded with features, including one that gives users the ability to play their entire music collection on two or more computers -- even away from home, at work -- without transferring files.

When Media Center is connected to a television, it can record the user's favorite shows. Another TV-based feature is the ability to present photos in a slideshow format -- the option that lures the warehouse passersby.

Hillegass doesn't use the warehouse for much else now. It's much as he left it when the company moved across the street to 211 N. 1st St. in 1998.

Inside, the main floor feels like one large period room transplanted from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. There's furniture left behind from the move, high-backed, plush red armchairs, framed photos of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, two bookshelves (one filled with books, the other with antique knickknacks), and a solid marble table. Different scents from aromatic wood paneling linger in various corners, like walking past the perfume counters in Marshall Field's.

On the second floor, packed in a small side room, is a rainbow jungle of old computer wires strung from shelves, wrapped around monochrome-display monitors and cluttered arrays of abandoned hard drives, keyboards and other peripherals.

"It all still works," Sohal said. "Who knows? We may use some of it again someday."

The rest of the building, including the third floor, is off-limits. "Unsafe," Sohal said.

Sohal said Hillegass isn't planning on moving J. River back to the warehouse, and won't renovate the place any time soon. It's a historic part of Downtown, he said, to be preserved.

That, and it offers him entertaining reprieves from his daily tasks.

Sohal admitted when he sits in his third-floor office, he will watch people's reactions to the television and the building.

"Lots of people stop. I've even seen photo shoots using the building as a backdrop," he said. "It's a beautiful old place."

