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**4-Tell Co-Founder Finds Columbia River Gorge the Perfect Place to Incubate a Startup, and Sustain a Life**

STEVENSON, Wash. (March 24, 2011) — Ken Levy spends his days creating software that helps retailers bring consumers closer to happiness in their purchasing decisions. It's the sort of predictive assistance that shoppers find on Amazon or Netflix. For mere mortals, it's scary-smart stuff involving the use of deep algorithms (whatever those are).

Funny, then, that Levy needed no such predictive technology to decide that he wanted very much to start his third company in the heart of the Columbia River Gorge.

Levy and company co-founder Neil Lofgren are part of a small core group guiding 19-month-old startup 4-Tell, based in Stevenson, Wash., about 45 minutes east of Portland, Ore. The company grew out of a top-2-percent finish in the Netflix Prize competition, and the belief that its software could better serve mid-size businesses than that of the “winner.”

Levy admits that his choice of residence may seem a bit far afield from the creative energy of an urban environment. No Gorge city has more than 12,000 residents, and that's the appeal.

“When we moved here, my wife and I decided we wanted a good place to raise our kids,” says Levy, 4-Tell's chief executive. “It's a compromise. There are great benefits to living here. My kids are free to run around like kids.”

Technology and a top-tier talent pool make the rest of it happen. 4-Tell so far has had no problem luring people who share the founders' love of a good outdoors adrenaline rush. Levy himself was lured to the Gorge in 1991 by his love of windsurfing, and mountain biking, and now kite boarding.

He isn't alone. More than 70 companies that either make and deploy technology, or rely heavily on it, have chosen to locate in the 45-mile stretch between Stevenson-Cascade Locks on the west, and The Dalles on the east.

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That group includes such high-flyers – and major employers -- as Google, and unmanned aircraft pioneer Insitu, and such modest ventures as Streamzap and Animation Toolworks.

“People who are willing to take risks in business are into adventure sports,” he says. “It's the calculation of fun over the risk factor in both. The whole point of running a company is to get the highest reward for the lowest risk, but be willing to take the risk.”

Levy says 4-Tell's five employees – his wife, Amy Weissfeld, heads sales and marketing – get the same excitement from launching a startup as they do from two hours of windsurfing.

By contrast, Levy says, high-tech startups might not be the best place for someone who prefers a leisurely walk. Not that he doesn't also appreciate the therapeutic value of a good walk, and does, easily and often, right out the back door.

Life in Stevenson lets Levy balance a focused, demanding and stressful work life with the calming influences of nature, and the dialed-down pace of a community with fewer than 1,500 people.

“When people are working for a startup, it's nice when you can take a great break three minutes from your work,” Levy says. “You don't have to go away for a long weekend. It's important that you don't get too exhausted and make bad decisions.”

And, when he needs to, he can hop on the freeway and be at a meeting or departure gate in Portland in under an hour. Levy says none of this would be possible without broadband access, and a willingness to embrace a “cloud” staffing model.

4-Tell has employees in Stevenson, Hood River and White Salmon, both 20 minutes east, plus a couple of consultants. “We run our company by web meetings, and sell our software by web meetings,” Levy says. “Our servers are in San Francisco. We are truly in the cloud.”

Two of its early customers also are based in the heart of the nation's first National Scenic Area. 4-Tell has helped HMK boost online sales of its snowmobile gear by 25 percent, and seen HitchSource grow online sales of trailer hitches and other recreational hardware by 10 percent.

In five years, 4-Tell expects to have more than 100 employees. To serve that expansion, 4-Tell plans to open another office, in Portland, which will support the need for face time in ways that cloud connectivity might not.

“What attracts a technical company to the Gorge is the employees you can get,” Levy says. “As you grow, not every employee will be as devoted to the company's original location.”

If attracting the best talent is the goal – and it is – then it's critical to meet them halfway. If that means a meeting at 9 p.m. – after the kids are home from soccer and tucked in bed – then so be it.

“Part of being a creative company is letting people work where they're most creative,” Levy says. “You want the best people for the job. With the technologies out there, you don't have to be in the same location.

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To create virtual face-to-face – the “watercooler conversation” where good ideas happen – Levy has become a big fan of tools such as Skype video conferencing, Zoho's web application suite, and Google docs.

“Our technology lives in the cloud, and our company lives in the cloud,” Levy says.

If all this sounds alluring, Levy says that yes, 4-Tell is looking for more than a few good people with tech backgrounds in everything from programming to sales, marketing communications to customer service.

For people who might actually like to live in the cloud – Stevenson gets more than 70 inches of rain a year – Levy will gladly connect them with a Realtor, and share directions to his favorite windsurfing beach.

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