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SEE THE LIGHT

Diane Cricchio's
TimeLine Video
Specializes in
Bright Ideas

By Bryant Frazer

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TimeLine Video helps
Spencer Trask Ventures visualize
a century of bright ideas

Seeing the LIGHT

The screen is blank but for tiny, indistinct particles floating across, out of focus, and shards of light jutting from the center of the screen. The cloud of twinkling pinpoints grows thicker as the fragments coalesce, pulling toward the center. Pieces of glass can be seen, tumbling inward. Suddenly, in a magnesium-hot flash, the dots of light collapse and collide, abruptly taking the shape of a light bulb at the center of the image.

The image, developed for the investment firm Spencer Trask Ventures, wasn't easy to capture—it took a Hollywood-caliber pyrotechnics expert, an experienced feature cinematographer, and an awful lot of high-speed 35mm film to make the light bulbs



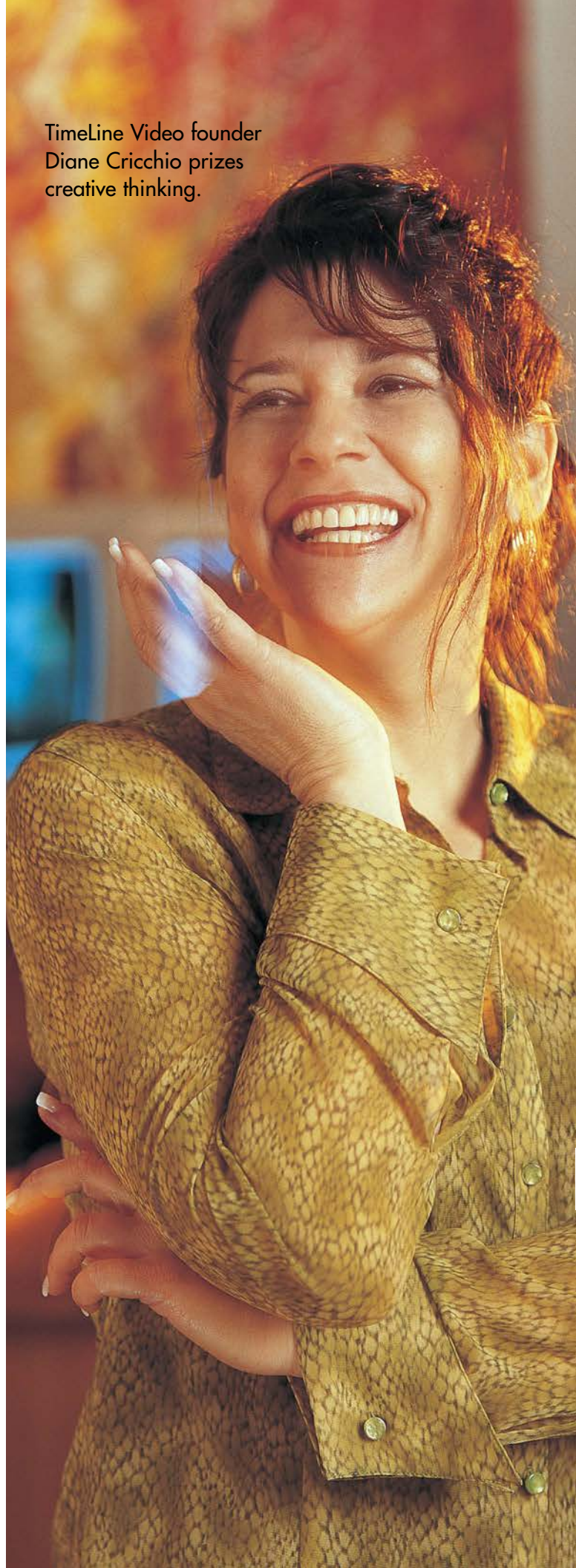
implode just so. But getting the image right was crucial. Diane Cricchio and TimeLine Video had been charged with capturing the essence of a venerable investment firm, and the companies it financed, in just a handful of pictures. “Our job is to protect

these wonderful ideas, just like a light bulb protects the filament, and then we connect it to our network and electrify the idea,” declared Spencer Trask’s chairman, explaining why the company’s symbol is a light bulb. For Cricchio, this idea suggested a striking visual and an important metaphor, and demanded the quality of imagery and imagination that she strove to provide.

Cricchio founded TimeLine seven years ago when she was a freelance video producer who wanted to go into business for herself. Today, putting lean times and not a few tears behind her, Cricchio has built TimeLine into a formidable operation. The 2,000-square-foot facility houses two online Avid systems plus an SGI workstation with Softimage 3D software for high-end animation projects. A separate room holds an offline Avid system, which Cricchio rents out to filmmakers, who have access day-and-night, for long-form projects.

But Cricchio’s specialty is bringing a volatile combination of creative types together to generate sparks for a specific project, such as the sparkling Spencer Trask light bulbs. “We were trying to come up with a metaphor for Spencer Trask,” Cricchio explains. “The light bulb is probably the most overused symbol ever. How do you make the light bulb new?”

TimeLine Video founder
Diane Cricchio prizes
creative thinking.



Seeing the Light

The light bulb explosions were photographed as part of a corporate identity project for Spencer Trask Ventures, a little-known investment firm that has helped finance potent breakthroughs in medicine and technology. The firm's founder, Spencer Trask, was an original trustee of the New York Edison Company, and the firm itself helped finance the development of electric light, making the light bulb an indelible corporate symbol—the company's slogan is "First to See the Light." Last year, Trask was looking to produce an eye-catching video that would educate potential investors on the company's history and philosophy.

"This project actually started off as something completely different from what it ended up being," explains Eric Paul, Spencer Trask's director of venture marketing. Originally, Paul said, the company had intended to install a video wall in the lobby of its offices and needed a short loop to communicate the firm's story to visitors. In June 2000, just as the company was getting started on the project, Paul was hired, and immediately decided that the project should reach farther than just an in-house video loop.

"It was my belief that we had a much more evocative story to tell our customers, and I thought video was a compelling medium," Paul continued. "We have the traditional marketing communications elements, like brochures and a Web site, that tell our story well, but not to the depth, or the degree—it's not a tactile, emotive form of communication like video can be."

The video was reconceived as a communications piece targeted mainly to a

base of potential customers looking for sound investment possibilities. "We don't just ask our investors to contribute financial capital; we ask them to get involved with the companies we work with," Paul says. "One of the best ways to do that is with testimonials showing that investors who got involved with these companies became involved with world-changing."

When Paul came on-board, Spencer Trask had already made a call to Fred Margulies, an independent producer based in New York City. Margulies had been recommended for the job by a colleague who had worked with Spencer Trask in the past. Upon speaking with the team at Spencer Trask, Margulies decided that the job was too big for him to tackle by himself. But Margulies is the owner of Toucan Productions, a scalable entity that he describes as a virtual corporation. "There was a huge job there that Fred Margulies couldn't do, but Toucan Productions could," Margulies says.

Margulies flipped through his mental Rolodex, thinking about a partner who could handle the project but would also convince the client that it was in good, steady hands even as new collaborators came on board. "When a project like Spencer Trask suddenly looms, I want to turn around and hire people that I trust, so I can present to the client a tight-knit group they know they can reach, rely on, and get extraordinary creativity from," he says. So he called his friend Diane Cricchio, with whom he has a long working relationship.

"Fred called and said he had an opportunity to bid," Cricchio recalls. "He knew it was going to be a high-ticket item, and he picked us because of our reputation as being

very creative and innovative. I was flattered—and I thought he made a good choice. Because I knew we could do it."

Gathering the Team

It took about a month for Cricchio, working together with her full-time staff as well as with her frequent outside collaborators, to develop the proposal that would eventually win her team the job. Cricchio immediately selected a graphic designer she had worked with over the course of the last five years, Chiam Bianco, to work on visual ideas. He would eventually be named as director for the project. Cinematographer Wolfgang Held, whose feature film work includes *Ripe* and *The Tic Code*, was hired as director of photography. Margulies brought in Mark Kupperman, a writer who would develop the concepts that Margulies would fine-tune into the final script.

Through the process, Margulies recalls the Spencer Trask crew as being unusually amenable to spending the extra time and money required to do the job right. Margulies suggested, and Paul quickly agreed, that Spencer Trask would be better off with a video that could actually be sent out to their customers, rather than a simple lobby presentation. Early on, Margulies suggested DVD as a primary delivery format, and again Spencer Trask agreed. "I pitched film," Margulies says. "Usually that's shot down for budget reasons. But not only did they want film, they wanted 35mm. And we quickly realized we had a tiger by the tail, Diane and I. We had the project that comes in between the ones that pay the rent but you wouldn't put on your reel. We could be proud of this, and we could do it the way we wanted to."

Paul explains the mindset. "We sell a very high-ticket item," he says. "We're asking investors to put \$100,000 or more into these companies. For us, it's important to convey the right feel and tonality in our messaging. We used film as opposed to video, and that has some obvious price implications, but we felt it was important for the richness and luxuriousness of the visual presentation. We need people to feel not just good but great about us."

Pitching Visual Ideas

Meanwhile, Cricchio's team was spinning visual ideas. Given that the light bulb was a touchstone for Spencer Trask, they decided that light would have to be a visual theme in the piece. The paintings of Johannes Vermeer, notable for their interplay of light and color,

AT A GLANCE

TimeLine Video

- **FOUNDED:** 1994
- **HEADQUARTERS:** 1 Bridge St., Irvington, NY 10533
- **PHONE:** 914-591-7360
- **FAX:** 914-591-7461
- **WEB SITE:** www.timelinevideo.com
- **E-MAIL:** information@timelinevideo.com
- **FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES:** 6
- **2000 REVENUE:** \$1.3 million
- **FACILITIES:** 2,000 square feet
- **PRINCIPAL BUSINESS ACTIVITIES:** full-service production and post-production design, including concept, script, production, graphic design, animation, editing, packaging design and duplication. Delivery on all formats, including CD-ROM, DVD and streaming video



were cited, as were the chiaroscuro techniques of Caravaggio and the more contemporary images of David Hockney.

“[Spencer Trask] said, ‘You guys get it,’” recalls TimeLine Executive Producer Christopher Ming Ryan, who was in charge of concept development for the Spencer Trask project. “That whole meeting was about sensibility. They had their branding company sit in on that meeting.” At the heart of those pitch meetings was a question of trust. “You need the client to believe in you,” Ryan says.

Take, for example, the case of the exploding light bulbs. Faced with the challenge of reinventing an image that’s become a great cliché among modern symbols, Cricchio hit upon the idea of blowing up the bulbs, but running the film backwards. It makes conceptual sense: in their meetings, the chairman of Spencer Trask described an idea as the filament in a light bulb, and said that Spencer Trask Ventures functions as the glass that protects the light inside. It was also clear that Spencer Trask relied on a network of people to whom it could turn when it needed to generate cash to fund a great idea, or a brilliant start-up. To Cricchio, the key image would be the fragments of glass all coming together in reverse motion to create the shell protecting the previous light of an idea. It would be an image to dazzle the eye, but also to communicate an ideology.



Getting that visual on film was also an awesome, expensive task, and TimeLine couldn’t move forward until Spencer Trask bought into the idea completely. The one-day shoot wound up requiring 16 separate people on the set, and took fully 16 hours to photograph. TimeLine shot the footage on Kodak’s 5279 high-speed 35mm film stock (Vision 500T), using a Photo-Sonics 35mm-4C high-speed camera that sent the raw stock tearing through at 1,000 frames per second. The camera was mounted on the floor, shooting up toward the bulbs that were exploded overhead. A pyrotechnician was required to set up the explosions, and Cricchio chose special-effects whiz Jeff Cox of No Joke, a special effects and production-design company in Philadelphia. A specialist

was also standing by to make sure nothing caught on fire.

Some problems were unforeseen. The warehouse space that TimeLine used for shooting wound up being dusty. That’s not a problem for normal photography, but dust has a real presence when it’s photographed with 1,000 frame-per-second clarity, meaning that the crew had to periodically spray the floor with water to keep the particles down. The crew used a video tap to get an idea of what the footage might look like, but, at only 30 frames per second, it was hard to get a good feeling for the final image. Finally, there was no gate in the high-speed camera, meaning that the image would have to be electronically stabilized during post-production. Cricchio remembers that each explosion was preceded by an equally ear-shattering roar much like the sound of a lawnmower. It was the sound of the camera getting up to speed.

But nobody complained about the results—sparkling, spinning bursts of smoke and light that provide an image that’s both abstract and concrete. Out of 32 explosions photographed, about eight were usable, Cricchio says. She gives Bianco credit for insisting on going through the routine so many times, knowing that of all the attempts made, only a small fraction would include the type of image they needed.

Making Metaphors

The rest of the filmmaking was comparatively straightforward. The company chairman, an articulate and telegenic man, was able to speak at length about the philosophy of Spencer Trask Ventures as well as the accomplishments of the other firms his company had financed. In between his appearances, the intent was to profile several leading companies that Spencer Trask had helped develop. Because those companies specialized in technology, the trick was to tell their respective stories without the help of concrete visuals. “We had to invent metaphors for them,” Cricchio says.

Those metaphors weren’t always obvious, but TimeLine made sure they were striking. One of the companies, Myriad Genetics, was responsible for isolating the gene that causes breast cancer. For the video, Timeline used the jacket of a book that was written about the discovery as well as the covers of news magazines highlighting the breakthrough. The image used on the cover of *New York* magazine was of a nude women covering herself with her arms. For that company’s metaphor segment, Bianco and director of

photography Wolfgang Held essentially restaged the magazine cover, with a naked—but still discreetly covered—actress standing in for the original model. Cricchio remembers the concept stretching the envelope of acceptable imagery in an essentially conservative corporate video, but marvels at the fact that Spencer Trask eventually went along with the idea.

For the segment on Cignal, which provides voice-over-data-line technology, 1s and 0s are briefly projected on the face of CEO Chris Rooney. For a segment on Dr. Jonas Salk and the Immune Response Corporation, which sought to develop an AIDS vaccine, polio-era footage of doctors and inoculations taking place is used, along with headlines related to Salk’s AIDS work. The work of iClick, which uses the Internet to deliver information to corporate employees, is summed up in an image of a woman sitting at a computer, with light streaming toward the camera from behind her—an image that, like many others in the film, recalls the lightbulb effects that are interspersed throughout.



The most challenging aspect of conceiving and shooting the film, Cricchio says, was maintaining a consistent feel and pace while keeping the viewer entertained—quite a challenge over the span of a 20-minute video presentation. Organizational skills were key, both in terms of budgets and creativity. “When you say ‘35 millimeter,’ everybody’s rate goes up,” notes Cricchio. “You need so many people, and everybody is more expensive. We had 12 days of shooting, some in California and some in New York, so we needed to have a production manager, someone exclusively to watch the budget.

“Twenty minutes is 20 minutes,” she continues. “It needs to keep you entertained—



and how do you keep a look consistent for 20 minutes? You storyboard as much as you can, but a lot of this was documentary-like, with the people being interviewed. You really have to trust your director, to trust that as he's shooting scene numbers one and 52 that he has a plan in his head, that it will cut, and that it is going to work later."

Putting It All Together

As lead editor on the project, Cricchio wound up with about 16 hours of footage that would eventually be trimmed into a fast-paced 20-minute video—a shooting ratio of about 48 to 1. "I thought shooting at a 15-to-1 ratio would have been plenty, and for the metaphor footage, it was," Cricchio says. "But I hadn't taken into account the different interview styles and how much footage that would burn." The interviews were shot, documentary-style, on Super-16 using Kodak's 7279 (Vision 200T) and 7274 (Vision 500T) film stock with an Aaton Super 16 camera. The cost savings on 16mm film allowed more shooting time overall.

Meanwhile, the "metaphor" footage was shot on 35mm, using Kodak 5248 (EXR 100T) and 5279 stock. That meant that the director and director of photography had to be careful to shoot both grades of film in such a way that the differences between 35mm and 16mm footage wouldn't be apparent. The film was developed at DuArt Film Laboratories in New York City.

Time was not on TimeLine's side during post-production. TimeLine was brought into the project on August 10 and given the green light on September 15. The film was shot substantially in October, and editing began in November. Cricchio had 30 days to edit the project before its scheduled premiere, and she recalls never leaving the office during the last four of those days. (She remembers one night when staffer David Jakubovic fell asleep with his finger poised over the mouse button; upon waking, Jakubovic immediately blurted, "Take a look at this!" and showed Cricchio a particularly deft edit.)

She worked using TimeLine's Avid Media Composer 9000 Meridian system with Intraframe editing and a 3D-effects module, which allowed her to edit high-resolution

PRODUCTION TOOLBOX

The following products were used to produce the Spencer Trask project. For more information, go to avmmp.com, click on InfoLink and enter the appropriate number.

Adobe After Effects, Photoshop	150
Apple Power Macintosh G3, Power Mac 9600	151
Boris FX	152
DigiEffects CineLook	153
Kurzweiler sound sampler keyboard	154
Media 100 ICE for Avid	155
Pinnacle 3D FX boards	156
SGI Zx10 workstation with mental ray rendering	157
SoftImage 3D	158
Sony Digital Betacam and Betacam SP decks	159
Terran Interactive Cleaner	160

uncompressed video. The project involved as many as 12 layers of video. The animation was provided on CD-ROM in TIFF image sequences to ensure no generational loss. The soundtrack consisted of eight audio tracks, which were exported in OMF format to a Digidesign Pro Tools system for additional audio sweetening and mixing. Cricchio recalls that, when crunch time hit, TimeLine locked the picture against the audio 10 days before actual delivery, so that the sound mix could be finished (by Larry Buksbaum at Now Hear This in New York City) while the editing was still going on.

The film-to-tape transfer, made at SMA Video in New York City using the Cintel URSA Diamond telecine, offered one last opportunity to touch up the colors and solidify the overall look of the project. "We took the late-night shift so we didn't have to pay the normal rate," Cricchio says. "We shifted the colors from the original exposures to meet the color scheme of each segment to give them a different mood while maintaining a look for the overall program."

Getting the Film Look

The project was finally delivered just in time for a December 14 video screening at the Hudson Theater in New York City, where Spencer Trask was holding a staff event. The idea was to debut the project in front of Spencer Trask's staff in a way that would honor their achievements as an organization, so the quality of presentation became very important. Margulies called Scharff Weisberg to handle the presentation; he specifically requested the Lightning 15SX, the top-of-the-line, 12,000 ANSI lumens video projector from Digital Projection. Scharff Weisberg brought in two projectors for the event and managed to align them side-by-side to project an image fed from DigiBeta onto the theater's 20 x 11-foot screen, which was masked to a 1.66:1 aspect ratio. "Consequently, the image looked

like a film, and people probably thought it was film. Because it was a big, bright image in a theater environment, it really knocked their socks off," Margulies says.

"It was great to see the reaction," says Ryan. "Usually, as a corporate producer, you don't see that, but this got a great response."

"We're delighted with the piece," agreed Paul. "It's the next best thing to a face-to-face meeting. Our sales process isn't

one of cold-calling—you don't cold-call someone for a hundred grand. But many times, business is conducted over the phone, and if your first interaction with us is a telephone call, well, it's one thing to get a brochure, but it's a totally different experience to pop something into a VCR. To us, it's critically important to have a tool that can help to facilitate the sales process, so we can really bottle up the spirit of this place and send it out."

Spencer Trask asked for delivery in multiple formats, including CD-ROM, VHS, DVD-Video, and Web streaming. The CD-ROM and DVD-Video both include the full version of the video and a 14-minute abridgement, plus a sub-menu allowing the selection of the individual company profiles. The streaming version is scheduled to be made available at the Spencer Trask Web site later this year.

It turns out that, in the end, Spencer Trask never even bothered to solicit other bidders for the project. "I was uncertain for a while," Margulies recalls. "They had us going into deep, deep development costs, where we were out on a limb and we didn't really have a contract. I said, 'This is unbelievable. Why aren't you bidding this out?' And they said, 'Because we like you.' I said, 'Can you translate that into something I can take to my accountant?' And I drafted a letter and they signed it. And several weeks later, they signed a very complete contract.

"They were much more comfortable with me than I realized early on. It was largely because of my availability, my focus, and the people I brought together to listen to and develop for them."

Cultivating Creativity

Cricchio agrees that the open-minded, brainstorming sensibility she shares with Margulies and the rest of her own crew is key to making clients comfortable enough to commit resources to projects. She likes to

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Setting Up Shop in the Suburbs

Suburban Westchester County isn't known as a center for video production—which is why, as far as Diane Cricchio was concerned, her current address in Irvington was the perfect place to set up shop with an Avid workstation and start figuring out how to grow a production business. "I wanted to be *the* place in Westchester," Cricchio recalls, with characteristic animation. "I wanted to be as cool as any New York City facility, to have the same level of talent as New York City. Everyone who's working in the city is living in Westchester—why not do their video work up here? They'll get the same quality, if not better."

So in 1994, she formed D. Cricchio Inc., dba TimeLine Video. Armed with letters from her clients pledging to hire her for at least one job, Cricchio financed the

collaborator Fred Margulies remembers that when he came over to work with her, he was asked to bring his own chair. Cricchio can laugh about that now; she also remembers a client who visited and recorded a voiceover in the shower, the spot in the house where the acoustics were best.

When she was asked to leave the house in March, 1995 by a landlord who didn't appreciate all the traffic going in and out, she rented a 320-square-foot space in her current building on Bridge Street in the village of Irvington, New York, where she moved in with her Avid, a laptop computer, and a telephone. (She was drawn to the locale—recently dubbed the Soho of Westchester in a local newspaper article—by her longtime affinity for Washington Irving, after whom the burg is named.) But by September, the coffers had run dry. Cricchio had spent \$6,000 to design a logo, but eventually found herself with basically no business. With \$500 to her name and about a month left before the bank was slated to repossess her Avid, Cricchio did the only thing she could—she advertised. She joined local business organizations and handed out stacks of business cards. She created her first brochure, and remembers sitting on the floor, stuffing envelopes and sobbing.

But that was a low point. Her networking efforts generated new business from unexpected sources, and from July of 1996 through March of 1999, she expanded TimeLine's office space to 2000 square feet. She hired an assistant, another editor and a part-time marketing specialist, for a total of four staffers. In 1997, she collaborated with Christopher Ming Ryan, a longtime compatriot from her days as a freelancer, on an instructional yo-yo video, which ended up being a substantial source of income. Ryan left his job at AT&T to join TimeLine in July of 1998. Last year, she began speaking with Louis G. Morin Jr., a recently retired manufacturing executive who eventually came on as senior managing director of strategic planning and business development. "It's really important to deliver value," Morin says of TimeLine's Westchester location. "Imagine how much we'd spend in Manhattan for this place. This is actually a much more logical place to be."

Rounding out the staff are editor and post-production manager David Jakubovic, assistant to the chairman Anna Sanginiti, and office manager Heather Rae Gallagher.

Cricchio wants to expand TimeLine's repertoire further into commercial work, eventually taking on a feature-film production. Certainly the TimeLine crew is still growing the business, with annual revenue climbing from \$34,000 in 1994 to about \$450,000 by 1997, and peaking at \$1.3 million last year. She doesn't take much solace in those numbers, though: "Right now, it almost costs this much to run the business." A certain degree of ambivalence has come along with Cricchio's success. But, pressed on the issue, she admits she's still jazzed on having a place of her own. "Nothing has been as exciting as doing this—I do what I love to do for a living, and there's no better feeling at nighttime. I'm usually the last one out at three or four in the morning, shutting off the lights and closing that door. And it's so gratifying." —B.F.



Six full-time staffers take care of business at TimeLine's cozy offices in Westchester County.

purchase of an Avid Media Composer just before leaving for a Nepalese vacation; when she returned from climbing around in the Himalayas, the system was waiting for her. Cricchio had never even owned a computer before. And she got the sense that she had just returned from the last vacation she would take in a very long time.

In October 1994, she rented a small house in Yonkers. Her longtime

say that her facility gives clients "instant scale," meaning, for instance, that an independent producer such as Margulies can hire her and suddenly have access not just to her equipment, but to the pool of talent she draws from. Meanwhile, she encourages creativity on the part of all her employees, going so far as to insist that they work on personal projects when official TimeLine jobs have been finished.

Even the design of the TimeLine offices aims to massage the right side of the brain. Different rooms are partitioned at unusual angles, but the large number of windows helps ensure that staffers don't feel walled off from one another. Currently, the walls are decorated with paintings by patients at the Creedmore Psychiatric Center in Queens, New York, whose work was celebrated in a recent documentary called *The Living Museum*. It's all about

encouraging staffers and visitors to be creative. "My idea was to design the facility in such a way to make you feel that you're in someone's living room," Cricchio says. "The more relaxed a person is, the more creative they are."

"As you walk in, you realize this is a different place," says Ryan. "And when you start working with us, there's a difference, too. In corporate video, creativity either makes or breaks you ... and it's important for the person not fulfilled by corporate work to keep that screenplay in the drawer going, to keep that film project going."

For Cricchio, the whole Spencer Trask experience was less a trial by fire than a confirmation that she had the skills, the resources, and the inspiration to bring myriad resources together and make a project sing. "For me, Spencer Trask was not a proving ground, but sort of the exclamation point," she says. "You know, at a lot of smaller production

houses, one of the complaints is, 'If we only had more money, we could have done a great job.' I disagree. Rising to the task of creating something when you have a budget to work within is not as easy as you think. It doesn't have as much to do with money as you may think, and our ideas have always been clever, substantial, and interesting. Whether your budget is less than \$50,000 or over \$300,000, the creative idea is there." ■



TimeLine Video

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