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Moving in, moving up

Rice eases move for couple -- and lab -- to BioScience Research Collaborative

BY MIKE WILLIAMS
Rice News staff

Many a good detective story begins with a footprint. But this story happens to be a romance.

The footprint -- more about that later -- brought Anna Grassini to John McDevitt and ultimately led both down a long and fascinating path to Rice University, where he is now the Brown-Wiess Professor of Chemistry and Bioengineering and one of the first to take up residence in the new BioScience Research Collaborative (BRC).

McDevitt brings with him a revolution in diagnostic medicine in his Lab-on-a-Chip, a miniaturized chemical sensing system that will someday be able to detect a variety of diseases and medical conditions quickly and cheaply. It's already in trials to look at saliva for signs of an impending heart attack and to analyze white cell counts in blood, particularly important in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. An Austin company founded by McDevitt, LabNow, is working to commercialize the latter.

JEFF FITLOW

John McDevitt and Anna Grassini were drawn to Rice University by the possibilities for research offered by the new BioScience Research

Both he and his wife, a former lawyer and real estate company owner who is now a life coach, bring a passion for global-health issues to Rice and feel strongly enough about the BRC's potential that they were willing to undertake the gargantuan task of moving his lab -- and the dozen or so people involved -- from Austin to Houston. They believe it will pay dividends for years to come.

"Our group feels we have a responsibility

to try to impact health care on a global basis," said McDevitt, sitting with Grassini in his third-floor office at the BRC a week after joining Rice. "And if we do this right, I think Houston can be a hub for a series of new devices that will really make a difference."

Collaborative and by the city of Houston itself, which both have quickly come to appreciate.

He and Grassini were still marveling at how well Rice handled moving the contents of a 5,000-square-foot lab that had been in place at the University of Texas-Austin for nearly 20 years. The process that began with detailed planning months before came down to one weekend of packing and trucking at the end of June. "Things are in better shape now than they had ever been in Austin," McDevitt said. "Like a lot of research labs, we would remake ourselves every couple of years -- we went from chemistry and physics and cryogenics into chemical sensors and then into biological sensors. We had a history.

"You could have done an archaeological dig in the lab, and depending on how many inches down you went, you'd see different things."

When they showed up for the BRC's official move-in day July 1, they found everything right where it needed to be in lab space McDevitt helped design. "We had to wear hard hats while we had our cake at the opening," Grassini said, "but in the lab, everything was in its place. As far as I can tell, it was a flawless process."

"I've never been so organized," said McDevitt, smiling.

The couple had hit the ground running last fall, buying a home in the Rice Military neighborhood and closing just days after Hurricane Ike. "The mortgage company didn't want to fund a house that had no power," Grassini said. "It all went through, miraculously, but I wouldn't recommend buying a house during a hurricane.

"Since then, we've been coming to Houston once or twice a month so John could have meetings with doctors at the Texas Medical Center and start building those relationships," she said. A native of Italy, Grassini is a born networker; McDevitt describes her as a "master of transitions."

"She gave me the strength and confidence to make this move," said McDevitt, a native Californian. Disrupting the lives of his co-workers was a stumbling block, he admitted, that Grassini helped him address.

"Put it this way," she said. "I did some coaching behind the scenes."

Grassini recalled sitting in their Austin living room with the lab's two senior scientists (both now at Rice) and presenting the case for Houston. "I had come to the conclusion that Austin has a chip on its shoulder about Houston," she said. "When we told people we were moving, they said, 'Are you insane?'"

But all agreed there were reasons enough to make the leap: the welcoming attitude of Rice, the potential of the BRC, the accessibility of the Texas Medical Center -- and Rebecca Richards-Kortum.

"She's the key to everything," McDevitt said of Richards-Kortum, director of the Rice 360˚: Institute for Global Health Technologies and a former colleague in Austin. "She's a real treasure for Rice, and following in her footsteps made me feel comfortable in coming here."

McDevitt and Grassini appreciate the value of footsteps, but whoever took the step that got them together remains anonymous. "I was at Wellesley College, trying to figure out where to apply for graduate school, when I found an application on the ground with a big footprint on it. It was an application to Stanford," Grassini said. "I took it as a sign."

The next year, Grassini and McDevitt encountered each other at Stanford. "It was love at first sight," she said.

Now they're both falling for Houston, where McDevitt finds running along Buffalo Bayou "part of the sanity equation," and they both appreciate the short distance to the theater and museum districts.

And they're both grateful for the warm reception they received at Rice. "We had such a feeling of welcome for John and for me at Rice," Grassini said. "I felt like Rice would open doors for me and they would welcome me just as much as they welcomed him."

McDevitt is grateful for the kind of access to medical, bioengineering and microelectronic expertise surrounding the BRC that will help him bring Lab-on-a-Chip to bear on the world's health woes. That excites him as he steps forward into what is, at long last, a detective story, too.