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John Becker of Red Wing has changed from a technology company to picture framing, a passion that began after he felt the effects of the 9/11 attacks.

9/11 fueled career change

Disgruntled guru became happy, successful small business owner

By Brett Boese

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RED WING — Ten years ago, John Becker was a disgruntled employee at an international technology company who was reluctantly meeting his boss in Boston for an annual job review.

He actually hoped he'd be fired. Instead, that painful meeting was interrupted when two terrorists crashed planes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in a field in Pennsylvania.

The tragedy became a transformational experience Becker of Red Wing.

"I'll never forget his reaction," Becker said of his boss,

who had flown in from Paris. "He was like 'Eh.' It didn't matter to him. He actually wanted to continue the job review. I don't remember a single word he said after that."

Somewhere along the way as he tried to get back home, he decided to quit his job — which he had somehow kept through the post 9/11 haze — to pursue a different passion with his wife, Valerie: picture framing. Though it took a tragedy to provide that impetus, Becker now calls it one of the the best decisions he's ever made.

Business begins

The Beckers had already established a small client base prior the opening their own business in early 2002, as Val had been framing pictures out of their metro home for the previous five years. But the couple moved to Red Wing shortly before opening Red Wing Framing & Fine Art Printing, posi-

tioning themselves to serve both the Rochester and metro markets.

They got a lucky break in 2008 when they received nearly 10 minutes of uninterrupted air time on Hometown, a PBS series on home remodeling, that was shown around the country and remains in syndication to this day. Becker says that nationwide exposure provided "a real big bump" in sales, which is reflected in the bottom line and the far-flung locations of many repeat customers.

Gross sales in the shop's first year was just \$45,000, but the couple nearly hit \$400,000 in 2010. Despite the ongoing uncertainty of the economy, they say they're on pace to set a new high again this year.

The shop has 4.5 employees and three revenue streams: custom framing, large format printing and Red Wing Digital. Red Wing Digital is aimed at digital photographers who are seeking a unique way to present their pieces. It uses

a small backing that creates a floating effect when hung on a wall, though it does not use a traditional frame. The former technology guru says his is the only shop between Chicago and San Francisco to offer such an option.

The shop's continued success and its new offering has the couple seeking more workspace.

Despite all the success — or perhaps because of it — the 10th anniversary of 9/11 has been a poignant topic for the Beckers in recent weeks.

"You can't help but think how temporary life is after it's been taken from you in something like 9/11," said Becker, who is also president of the Downtown Red Wing economic development group. "If there's something you want to do or feel a need to do, you better do it now. By the time I was back in Minnesota, I knew I had to do something else. And I'm very happy with my decision."