

## Long-Distance Relationship Anchors Furniture Imports Business

### Cargo Co-owners Trek the Globe in Search of Antiques

By Phil LaPadula

On September 11, Stefan Schwing was on a plane that took off from Washington's Dulles Airport at 7:50 a.m., 11 minutes before the plane that hit the Pentagon left Dulles.

When the pilot announced that they would have to make an emergency landing because of a "national security situation," the plane made a steep descent and landed in Jacksonville. Stefan had to take a bus from Jacksonville to Fort Lauderdale.

He was just one of many lucky-though-inconvenienced flyers that day, except for one ironic twist: "I was carrying three suitcases of rugs from Pakistan and Turkmenistan [a country bordering Afghanistan] for the store," he recalls.

Anyone who knows Stefan would not be surprised that he was aboard a plane on

Java, Indonesia, but things went awry and they never crossed paths.

Stefan sounds rather stoic about that whole episode: "The hotel overbooked, so Eric's reservations got canceled and he had to check in somewhere else. The cell phones didn't work there, so we never found each other," he says with a laugh.

At first glance, their backgrounds appear to be worlds apart, too. Born in Heidelberg, Germany, Stefan, 41, has a degree in set design and worked for 10 years designing sets for catalog photo shoots and TV commercials. He now uses his design skills to give the shop an aesthetic appeal that is often missing from furniture stores.

Eric, 34, was born in New Jersey and graduated with a degree in political science from George Washington University. He



The exterior of Cargo Imported Antiques

Stefan is especially proud of the shop's Chinese stock, which includes pre-revolutionary pieces (prior to 1949) and high-end Chinese (120 to 200 years old). "I didn't want to deal directly with China, so I found a woman in San Francisco who has a Chinese restaurant and imports furniture from China," Stefan explains.

But he advises clients against furnishing an entire room in Chinese or in any single style, suggesting that a mix of contemporary and antiques creates a more interesting look. "You don't want it to look like grandma's coffee shop," he says.

In his shop, Stefan has blended the various styles and carefully arranged the pieces to create a homelike, comfy setting. "It's all about first impressions," he says. "I don't want it to look like a warehouse. I don't stack the coffee tables; I make the beds with real sheets. We try to show them what it looks like when they actually have the furniture in their house."

He even provides a consulting service for customers who want interior design tips. "I'll go to someone's house, and I won't charge them for it," he says.

A friendly dog – part ridgeback and part pit bull – lounging by the desk and a goldfish bowl with three rather large goldfish add to the shop's homey atmosphere.

Stefan explains that goldfish bowls are common in Chinese *feng shui* arrangements: "Two orange goldfish and a black one are considered good luck."

It was a bit of luck and a seasoned traveler's knack for spontaneity that landed Stefan in South Florida. In 1988, he stopped in California for a four-week vacation on his way to Australia to accept a new job as a prop stylist for a modeling agency.

But he was so enamored with California that he ended up staying for five years, living on a houseboat in a floating community in Sausalito, and working as a prop stylist there.

After leaving California, he spent a year in New York City, a year in Hawaii, and a year in Miami Beach, before gravitating to Fort Lauderdale, where he met Eric, who was living in Washington, D.C., at the time and visiting South Florida frequently.

After attending some furniture auctions,

Stefan got the idea to start a business, but he needed money to do it. So he went to massage school for two months and then took a job as a massage therapist in a chiropractor's office.

"I had a plan to buy a house and then start a business," he says. "It was all freelance, so I made up to \$70, \$80 an hour doing massages, and I worked all day." After a year of back rubs, he had made enough money to start the business.

Stefan picks out the merchandise, handles most of the selling, and hires employees for Cargo, while Eric negotiates prices, discounts, and warehouse leases. They bridge the distance between them with frequent phone calls.

"We probably talk on the phone about five or six times a day," Eric says. "We're both really strong personalities, so it's easier to hang up the phone rather than go sit in the other room."

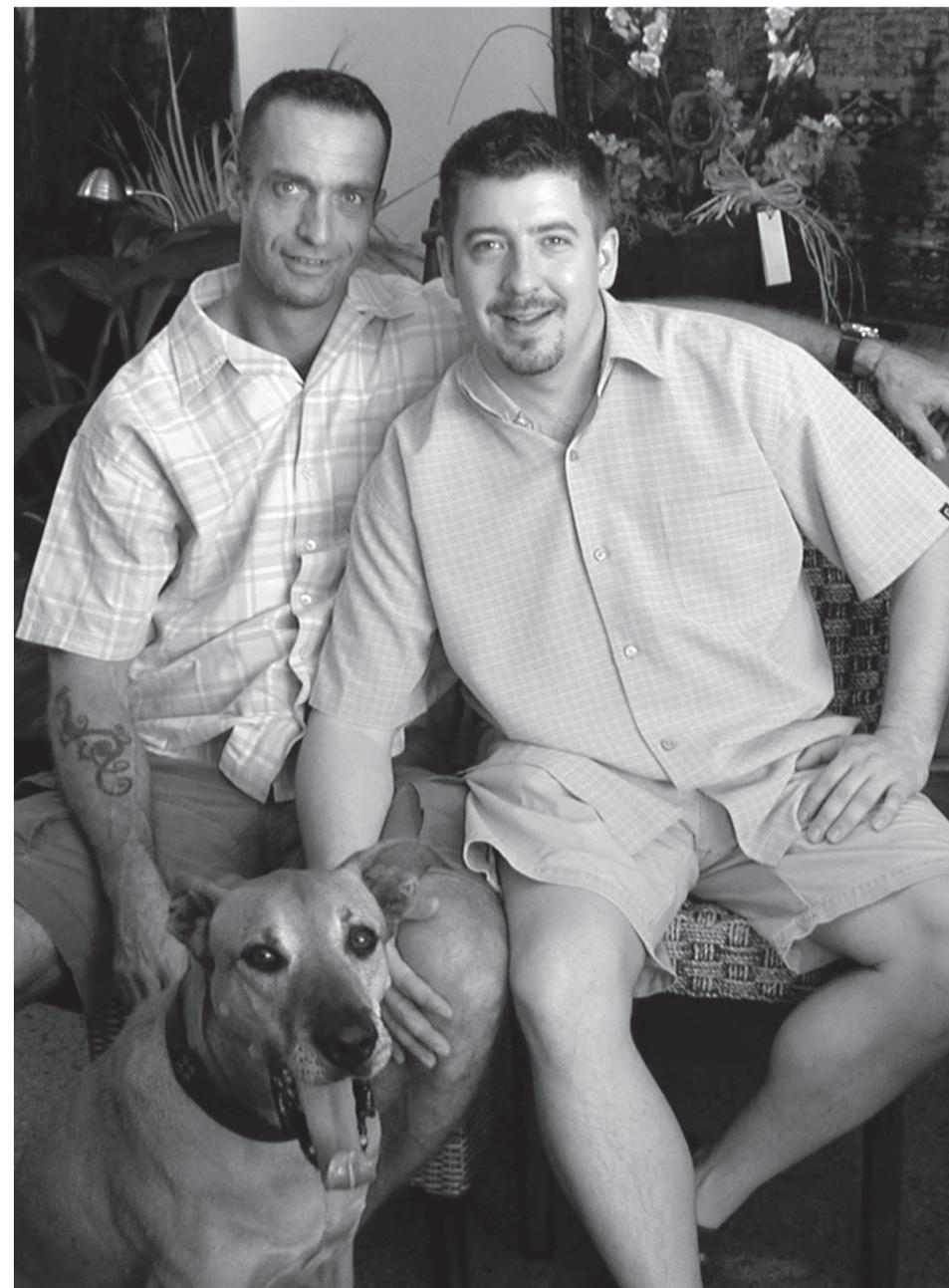
Considering that neither Stefan nor Eric had any previous retail experience, the 1½-year-old business is doing very well. In fact, they plan to open a new warehouse soon near Catalog X, which will enable them to handle a larger volume of containers and sell to other businesses.

They also plan to open another Cargo store next month in New Jersey, which will employ Eric's parents who are retired and living on fixed income.

Eric is considering moving to Fort Lauderdale in about a year. Asked if they are worried about changing a long-distance relationship that's working, Stefan responds, "Eric would probably still have his own business, probably doing consulting, and would still travel. We're both very independent."

Meanwhile, a truck has just arrived at the warehouse, so there's another container to unload. Like the unexpected detours of traveling, unloading a delivery from a distant port can sometimes produce unwelcome surprises, such as the container from Indonesia that arrived with a 6-foot-long snake skin. "We wondered where the snake was," Stefan says.

Cargo is located on 26<sup>th</sup> Street behind Egg & You restaurant. Phone: 954.568.5944.



Stefan Schwing (left), Eric Eife (right) and their pet ridgeback/pit bull

that fateful September morning. The co-owner of Cargo, a furniture imports store in Fort Lauderdale, has probably traveled as many miles as some big-company CEOs or jet-setting celebrities. And the terrorist threat has not clipped his wings in the least.

In fact, Stefan and Eric Eife, his boyfriend and business partner of two years, have redefined the term "long-distance relationship."

Stefan lives in Fort Lauderdale and operates the store on a daily basis. Eric lives in Washington, D.C., and flies down to South Florida at least twice a month, sometimes every weekend during the winter. Stefan ventures up north about every other month to visit Eric. It's not unusual for the two to meet for dinner in San Francisco or Los Angeles after a day of shopping for furniture.

They once had plans to rendezvous in

works for a large wireless communications company, which sent him on trips totaling about 200,000 miles last year.

The couple's shared love for travel became the driving force behind Cargo. The shop's merchandise hails from the distant corners of the globe: country Chinese, Plantation, and British colonial are the specialties. "We don't buy anything from wholesalers; it's all imported – from Indonesia, China, India," says Stefan. "I like to see the quality myself before I order."

He exhibits extensive knowledge of the various period pieces, acquired from logging thousands of frequent-flyer miles visiting reproduction factories and bidding at container auctions in faraway cities. He'll tell you the story behind the 19<sup>th</sup>-century oil lamp from India, the popularity of temple tables, or why the urban plantation look is catching on in Fort Lauderdale.

