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Robert Delf has been CEO of several companies and is founder of Northwest Cellars. He has been playing the piano, and loving it, since age 5. Here he is seen playing a few songs at the Waterfront Seafood Grill on Seattle's Pier 70, one of his wine clients.

Passions

Sound loop

Executive appreciates theater crowd applause

By JUSTIN MATLICK
STAFF WRITER

When Robert Delf was a 24-year-old computer programmer, he got an offer that could have

changed his life: to play piano for Gloria Kaye, a then-well-known Canadian singer who was about to embark on a North American tour. It was 1973, and

Delf jumped at the chance.

But three days after he resigned his post at Columbia Computing Services, the tour was canceled — so Delf took his job back, and rose through the ranks to become CEO. Now, after 30 years in the software industry and a new career as founder of Northwest Cellars LLC, he doesn't have any regrets — but he does wonder about what life as a full-time musician would have been like.

"It's interesting to think about how that one small thing could have made a huge difference in my life," says Delf, who began playing piano when he was 5 years old and played his first professional show at age 13.

Delf's passion for music never dwindled, and he has punctuated his years as an executive with stints as a pianist and musical director in various local productions. For instance, when Delf left Columbia in 1985, he bought a tuxedo and took a job playing piano at the Nordstrom in downtown Seattle.

"I wanted a place to play while I was looking for my next CEO gig," he says.

A few months later, he began a 10-year stint as CEO of Interliq Software Corp., a mortgage-software company, and later moved on to start a consulting business and become interim CEO of Easy Systems Inc. In 2004, he founded Northwest Cellars in Kirkland, which makes custom-label wine, then sells it to companies and restaurants, and for events such as weddings.

Meanwhile, Delf spent most of the 1990s playing keyboards for Seattle's Ken Boynton Band, and in 2003 started a

musical theater group dubbed the Rain City Players. With the Players, Delf served as pianist and musical director of shows like "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" and "I Do, I Do." Now, he is hoping to produce an updated version of a 1970s political satire, "What's a Nice Country Like You Doing in a State Like This?" The Capitol Hill Arts Center in Seattle has agreed to host the production, and is negotiating with the play's authors about whether Delf can adapt it using new lyrics.

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Robert Delf, pianist and founder of Northwest Cellars

Delf says his experience directing musicians has helped him build

better teams in the workplace, and that working through difficult pieces of music exercises his mind differently than his business pursuits. "Music demands a lot of mental dexterity, and it's an amazing training tool," he says.

Another perk: the applause. While Delf says boards of directors typically point out only a CEO's flaws and failures, a theater crowd will leap to its feet after a standout performance.

"You don't get that kind of feedback in life very often," Delf says. "I've never gotten a standing ovation from my board, but I've gotten lots of them in the theater."

Contact: jmatlick@bizjournals.com • 206-447-8505x158