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Plotting a public-policy move: Ric Kolenda.

Multimedia association co-founder keeps it new

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Ric Kolenda is a people alchemist. "I'm naturally interested in synthesizing ideas and putting different kinds of people together and seeing what's going to happen," he said.

That interest has led Kolenda down some interesting paths since he moved to Philadelphia in the mid-'80s to attend graduate school. He has:

- Helped bring Upper Merion Township government into the personal computer age;
- earned a master's degree in urban studies at Temple University and completed course work toward a doctorate in political science, also at Temple;
- taught at Temple, Philadelphia University and Rowan College of New Jersey;
- founded computer consulting firm Human Technologies and co-founded Web design firm Odyssey Systems LLC and the Philadelphia Area New Media Association.

Kolenda's latest ventures include trying to bring the Painted Bride Art Center into the digital age.

Long a member of the Painted Bride because of his interest in a wide and varied range of performing arts, especially music, Kolenda joined the Old City-based nonprofit's board of directors late last winter.

"I became aware of how tough it was to get day-to-day things done there with the technology they had," he said.

To rectify that, Kolenda created a Technology Advisory Board and has been recruiting people from the tech community to serve on it and work with it.

Its goal is not just to make sure all the Bride's audio, video and office equipment is technologically up-to-date. Instead, Kolenda wants to place the Bride at the forefront of the digital performing arts world.

"We're envisioning artists (linked by computer networks) co-creating pieces in real time with people in other parts of the country or the world," he said.

Kolenda became interested in computers while he was working toward his master's degree at Temple.

After his first year of studies, he got an internship at Upper Merion Township, which led to a full-time job there. When Kolenda began working at Upper Merion in the spring of 1985, it had three PCs, all of which were used by secretaries for word processing. By the time he left 20 months later, the township had a minicomputer and 25 PCs.

By the end of the '80s, Kolenda was facing the moment of truth that confronts all doctoral candidates: Write your thesis or get on with your life. He chose the latter course and started doing temporary work as well as teaching. His computer skills, especially on the Macintosh, served him well and he was offered a full-time job at a prepress company called Wace Philadelphia. From there, he went to another prepress firm, Centennial Printing, and then wound up at EPS Associates in Wynnewood. There, he met Jason O'Grady, who turned him on to the Internet. "I was immediately hooked," Kolenda recalled. "The whole e-mail thing was so incredible to me.

In 1995, Kolenda, O'Grady and a third co-worker, Ryan Kaplan, left to form Odyssey Systems, one of the region's first Web design shops. The three were always looking for others to work with so they could provide clients with a complete package of services. In the course of doing that, they made friends in a number of Internet-related industries, all started going out for beers and the whole thing evolved into PANMA.

That was in June of 1996. By then, Kolenda was becoming frustrated with the direction Odyssey was taking, and in October, he left it to run PANMA on a more-or-less full-time basis.

Unfortunately, the organization only had enough money to pay him on a more-or-less half-time basis, so at the end of 1998, he and its other officers agreed to merge it into the Eastern Technology Council, a trade group with more than 12,000 members that is based on the Wayne campus of Safeguard Scientifics Inc.

Since then, Kolenda has worked for several more Internet-related companies. Recently, however, he has thought of moving into the public-policy world.

In addition to his work with the Painted Bride, he serves as chair of the Philadelphia School District's Computers and Technology Stakeholders Partnership and is a member of the Multimedia and Web Site Advisory Board of

the Art Institute of Philadelphia.

"I've always felt that it's very important to be involved with the community and give back to the community when you can," he said.