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Entrepreneur Ron Simkins creates a method for digital designs on leather.

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REVIEW & COMMENT

Crist vs. Rubio: It's celluloid vs. substance

Real Republicans in Florida, especially those big-money business people who helped finance Charlie Crist's march to the governorship four years ago, have a serious dilemma.

Intellectually, they know that former Florida House Speaker Marco Rubio of Miami — Crist's opponent for the Republican nomination to the U.S. Senate — lines up with their core values and philosophy far better than does Crist.
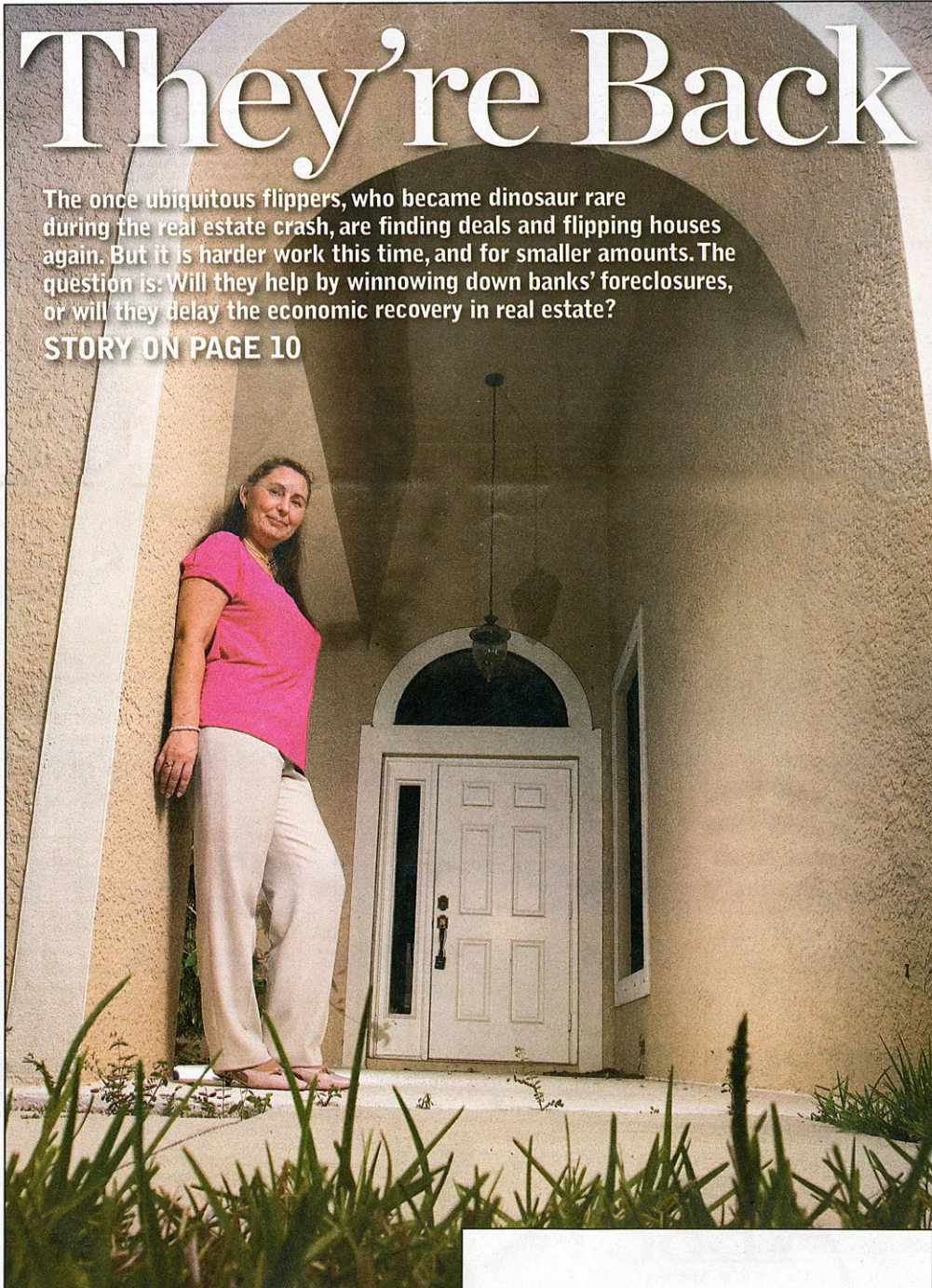
MATT WALSH

Real Republicans also know that when you measure what Rubio championed and enacted as Florida House speaker versus what Crist has championed and enacted in all of his positions (governor, attorney general, education commissioner, state senator), Rubio again is, unequivocally, a man of much more substance than is Crist.

And Real Republicans know that, when you analyze their political careers — Crist's 20 years, Rubio's eight — Rubio rose to House speaker in a meteoric trajectory largely on the substance of his ideas and leadership versus Crist, who did it on the basis of cream-puffy populism.

They are: a candidate of principles and free-market, limited-government ideals (Rubio) versus a cardboard caricature (Crist).

And yet, Florida Republicans continue to fund and support the caricature.

Ask Republican Party op-

They're Back

The once ubiquitous flippers, who became dinosaur rare during the real estate crash, are finding deals and flipping houses again. But it is harder work this time, and for smaller amounts. The question is: Will they help by winnowing down banks' foreclosures, or will they delay the economic recovery in real estate?

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Brian Tietz
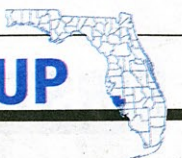
Suzanne Sherer, a Realtor with Remax Realty Team in Cape Coral, says investors are snapping up inexpensive homes in Lee County — often foreclosures — for cash, then re-selling them within weeks.

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FIRST UP

Leather Innovation

Entrepreneur Ron Simkins has had his sights on the multi-billion dollar leather industry for nearly a decade. He is finally moving in with what he hopes is a big bang.

The leather goods industry isn't normally a hotbed of innovation.

After all, leather, be it couches and shoes or coats and wallets, has been around a long time and pretty much sells itself.

But Ron Simkins, a Sarasota entrepreneur behind several million-dollar businesses, says he has discovered a way to ignite a match between innovation and leather: Printing digital images and colors right on to the skins.

These aren't decals. And these aren't sew-ons. They are essentially part of the leather. The discovery is the result of nine years and $5 million Simkins has spent on research and product development.

Simkins, co-founder of Sarasota-based LexJet, a $47 million dollar digital printing and software company, says his latest foray into the business world will turn the centuries-old leather industry upside down. He isn't short on optimism, either, as his target client list includes behemoth leather users such as Nike and Coach.

"This is a technological breakthrough in an industry that hasn't had a technological breakthrough in decades," Simkins says. "The nice thing about this is that it smells like leather, looks like leather and feels like leather because it is leather."

Simkins and his six-person research and development team made the discovery by examining shape memory polymers, a material that can change its form through temperature change. Shape memory polymers can be as thin as a strand of human hair and are used to manufacture products such as Wonderbras and tents used in high-altitude mountain climbing.

The research team was able to take a shape memory polymer and turn it into a unique and now patented strand of film that could be run through an inkjet printer. The process allows a digital image to be seamlessly applied to a leather product.

Simkins founded a company, SIF Technology, to harness the discovery. While the business, which stands for smart imaging film, has been around since 2000, Simkins hopes the next few months will be its time to shine: The company will begin a media and industry press blitz next month and hopes to go mass market in early 2010.

Greg Creech, who runs Creech & Co., a Sarasota upholstery business, is one of SIF's first clients. "People have been putting pictures on leather for years," says Creech, "but now we'll see printing on leather that actually works."

SIF Technology, which is run out of a 10,000-square-foot facility in an industrial park just north of downtown Sarasota, has a two-fold business model.

One, Simkins is thinking big: He plans to sell the manufacturing side of the technology to companies such as Nike through SIF's digital leather

Rod Millington

Sarasota entrepreneur **Ron Simkins** says his company, SIF Technology, has discovered how to seamlessly place colorful digital images into leather products.

assembly machines, which cost at least $200,000 each.

The machines will be as big as 7,000 square feet and are also models of efficiency. Simkins says it will be able to produce 50 to 60 square feet of leather every 20 seconds, the equivalent of 15 pairs of sneakers.

The other end of the business model is to provide custom-made

digital leather products to other businesses and eventually straight to consumers. Creech & Co. and a design studio in Detroit have already signed on.

The ambitious business model will likely take a larger investment than the $5 million Simkins has already put into SIF Technology.

The company, for example, will re-

quire another facility — one at least 10,000 square feet with specialized lighting and air control systems — to build the prototype assembly machine it wants to sell to Nike and other big leather industry players. Simkins is actively looking for a site in the Greater Sarasota area.

The affable Simkins, 61, exudes confidence that digital leather will be a big hit. He is also confident the company will be his final act in business. "This is my last deal," he says. "I'm done."

Ron Simkins, SIF Technology: 'The nice thing about this is that it smells like leather, looks like leather and feels like leather because it is leather.'

— *Mark Gordon*