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10-13-2011

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University Relations

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#### Recommended Citation

University Relations, "Alumni John and Theresa Witte's business delivers technology services rural communities demand and deserve" (2011). *Campus News Archive*. 562.

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**Alumni John and Theresa Witte's business delivers technology services rural communities demand and deserve**

*Summary: Recognizing the challenges and anticipating the rewards, the Wittes responded to regional needs in rural Minnesota.*

(October 13, 2011)-Alumni John '90 and Theresa Witte '92 understand rural living and rural challenges. Their business, Rural Solutions, Inc., provides answers and access to west central Minnesota residents who need computer and computing services. Rural homes, schools, and businesses, including farming operations, require connectivity as much, if not more, than their nonrural counterparts. Recognizing the challenges and anticipating the rewards, personal and professional, the Wittes responded to regional needs and now relish living and working in Madison, Minnesota.

John always knew farming would be in his future, but his farming parents insisted on a college education. He chose Morris for the computer science program and the location, commuting during spring and fall to help with fieldwork. He and Theresa, a St. Paul native, met on campus.

After college, John developed ag software for the United States Department of Agriculture Soils Lab and the West Central Research and Outreach Center in Morris. "This venture brought me into contact with other area entrepreneurs," he remembers. "We discussed marketable software applications for agriculture, which planted the idea of creating technology solutions for our rural area."

His next position was as Lac Qui Parle Public Schools technology coordinator. After building the district network, area businesses began asking him to set up their networks, too. "I was busier with 'side jobs' than I was at school, so I started contracting with local businesses to provide IT services on a regular basis." Soon, Rural Solutions, Inc. was launched.

John says, "Giving up a regular paycheck was scary, but word of mouth kept me busy. Many customers had been paying exorbitant fees for consultants to drive from the Twin Cities. The option of a local IT services provider was welcomed."

The next test came when the business grew beyond what John could do himself. "Adding an employee is a risk. I had more work than I could handle, but did I have enough to keep another person busy? And I had to transition from doing what I know best to becoming a manager of people, projects, and payroll."

In the last 10 years, Rural Solutions has grown to provide multiple services that rural communities demand and deserve: networking, custom applications, database design and management, web design, and project management. They serve large and small businesses and provide technology planning, implementing, and maintenance to area schools and local government. They work with onsite tech coordinators or serve as the sole service provider. Rural Solutions provides web, eCommerce, and email hosting solutions, as well as offsite backup. Of five employees, four are UMMers.

"We are blessed with consistent projects," says Witte, "and increased demand for support from home computer users allowed us to move from our home to a mainstreet store with a retail area, a modern, professional workshop, and a multimedia conference room."

Theresa, who manages the business, and John say that working in a small town is different than corporate America. “Rural service industries are as much about trust and interpersonal relationships as about expertise and professionalism. We found a balance, and we credit the small town feel of UMM and our liberal arts educations for giving us a well rounded view of life.” John also says the “quality of the CSci Department” gave him an edge, impacting Rural Solution’s success.

Technology is not a luxury. It’s a necessity for rural economies, healthcare, education, government, and the environment. Information and efficiency afforded through high quality access to technology increases productivity and yield—whether defined as academically prepared high school graduates profitable mainstreet businesses responsive local governments well monitored and managed farm operations or bountiful harvests. Solidly rooted in rural Minnesota, the Wittes live and work in this high-tech world.

Photo from left: Nick Tessman ’08, network and computer support specialist, who lives in Rosen with wife Amanda Croatt Tessman ’08 and daughter Kaylee (1) Darin Holter Theresa Riepe Witte ’92, manager Joe Rader ’09, network and computer support specialist, with an emphasis on web and database development, who lives in Benson and serves as Kerkhoven Murdock Sunburg School District tech coordinator and John Witte ’90, who also farms 500 acres and lives on the “home place” with Theresa and teenage children Josh, Natalie, and Tom. Their oldest, Krishana, married this summer.

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