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Innovative Lighting Design Begins at Home for Award-Winning Lightology President and Master Electrician, Gregory L. Kay

Roller Disco Lighting to Revolutionary Low-Voltage Halogen Systems

CHICAGO, IL (October 8, 2002)— When Greg Kay was experimenting with lighting techniques along the path to his North Side Chicago home, he knew he was on to something different when a pizza deliveryman walked up to the door one night and loudly exclaimed, "Wow!"

"The approach to the house is like an illuminated welcome," says the president and founder of Lightology, the dazzling three-story, all-contemporary lighting showroom at 215 W. Chicago Avenue. "The landscape lighting comes on first, so you see just the flowers dim up and glow. Then as you walk farther, the tree lights rise up and all of a sudden everything starts rising. First, there's the ground cover light and then you start seeing shrubs and trees lit up. As you walk farther, the stairs light up in front of you, and as you're walking up the stairs, the porch lights come on. That was all done with a timer and a dimmer. Well, the first time we tried it out, we ordered that pizza—and got a 'Wow!' as well."

Kay used his home in other ways for R&D purposes. "A lot of important products that we use came out of that house," he remembers. "When you're in your own place, you start seeing needs. For instance, I wanted a junction box, but they're always made too big, so we designed a smaller one—which, by the way, was picked up by Architectural Digest."

"There were a lot of little nuances. We developed a recessed light with a mirror coming back, and some shelf lighting that was unique. It's an old house, and in Chicago these old houses had a lot of rooms. You want to open everything up to get a kind of Frank Lloyd Wright ambiance as well as bring some nature inside. Well, once you knock out all the walls and open up the space, what do you have left? We looked at the space between the joists, and started doing a lot of floor lighting and skylight lighting. We did these amber pieces in the floor that glow. It's just a little two-inch piece of amber within the marble," Kay laughs. "That is from the old days when I was doing lighting for discos."

Numerous Honors Include Prestigious Guth Award

Over the years, Kay has won all sorts of awards and honors, including the prestigious Edwin

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F. Guth Award of Excellence in Lighting Design in 1988—one of the first ever presented to a Chicago-based lighting engineer—for his work on the AT&T Information Services Showcase Networking Division.

“It was an intriguing project with a big, black space,” he explains. “You walked in and saw a thick, cut-glass AT&T sign, and we lit it up with fluorescents on the side. Everything else was dark, and you saw this shadowy, mystery path that dimmed up in front of you. You finally came to the area where you wanted to be, the lights dimmed up and there was switch gear. Now, this is a really mundane piece of equipment, so we had to make it look creative, which we did by using dimming fluorescents, which were fairly new at the time. Then you left that area and it dimmed down and you went to another place and there were... telephones! That was really fun. Because here was a commonplace product, and with the use of lights and special color filters, we were able to make it exciting.”

From Roller Disco to Revolutionary Systems

The Detroit native began his career as an electrician, installing lighting for discos, which had become popular in the wake of “Saturday Night Fever,” the 1977 film starring John Travolta. “It was an exciting time,” Kay says. “And so many people really learned how to do lighting design then.” After earning master electrician status in 1979, he went into business with Midwest Skate Company, a distributor for roller skates, taking over the lighting part of the business. At a trade show in Reno, Nev., he met a competitor, Paul Gregory, who had designed the dance floor for “Saturday Night Fever” and who became Kay’s mentor. “I really became a lighting geek because of Paul,” he says. “I understood electricity from a technical standpoint—the science of it—but he showed me the art.”

In 1983 Kay attended what he calls the “revolutionary” Light World exhibition in New York, and became captivated with contemporary design. (“Because light bulbs were getting smaller, you were getting better design.”) That same year he moved to Chicago, and opened Tech Lighting, the city’s first all-contemporary lighting showroom.

At a show in Europe, he saw “wonderful” Italian glass, decided he could design lights with it, and in 1986 got into manufacturing—first cable lighting (Kable Lite), then TwinRail, MonoRail, Two-Circuit MonoRail and Free Jack (part of the end of a fixture and used for changing from one system to another). “The TwinRail was more technical, like putting together a train track, and the MonoRail was very exciting because it was simple and elegant. Basically, we focused on a low-voltage market.

“Temple” Offerings: Silk Shade Lamps to Elvis Pelvis

Lightology’s showroom—described by Chicago magazine as “a temple of contemporary lighting”—is filled with items such as spectacular silk shade lamps, hand-painted in Venice and inspired by Italian designer Mariano Fortuny, to colorful components with equally colorful names such as Metal Woman, Twist & Shout, Elvis Pelvis and Curly Torpedo with Tinkerbell. Drawing upon centuries-old glassmaking tradition, Italian artisans from the island of Murano near Venice provide handsome glass pendants, in exquisite colors and shapes, made to Lightology’s specifications.

The low-voltage halogen lighting systems enable customers to choose MonoRail, Kable Lite, RadiusWire (slim conductors that can be hand-bent into whimsical loops or graceful curves), TwinRail or a Free Jack canopy, then select adjustable heads or pendants. A transformer, either surface-mounted or hidden behind a wall or ceiling, converts standard voltage to an energy-efficient, safe-to-the-touch 12 or 24 volts. The conductor—cable, wire or rail—provides structure and carries power, and hardware components place the system exactly where it is wanted.

MonoRail, made of aluminum and soft brass, is hand bendable, so one can create the ideal shape to enhance and illuminate any room. Two-Circuit MonoRail provides two individually switchable circuits on a single run for a new level of lighting control. TwinRail's modular framework, made of hard brass, enhances or creates architectural detail and is assembled very much like the tracks of a toy train set. Kable Lite, made of chrome-plated copper strands of wire with a nylon cord inside, features slim parallel cables that virtually disappear, creating the illusion of lights floating in space and providing excellent lighting in high-ceilinged spaces such as great rooms and foyers.

Different Clients, Different Fixtures

Lightology has provided lighting design elements for such clients as Chicago restaurants Scoози (suspensions), Ben Pao (Kable Lites) and Pasha (MonoRail, custom fixtures); Armani AX Stores (Kable Lites); and Three Dog Bakery (MonoRail).

"I think the biggest thing I learned about lighting was to look at the detail, understand shadows, understand every little color," Kay notes. "Design-wise, I've been focusing on fixtures. What excites me is to see how creative people can get with the tools we give them." His favorite personal designs include:

- The Symphony Chandelier, winner of the Best New Product Design Award in 1999 at Lightfair International. A blend of nature and technology, its roots twist into a flowing stem, bursting into a glow of small halogen lamps with frosted glass stems, and the satin nickel or chrome arms are bendable to create any desirable shape.
- The MonoRail Aero, a low-voltage MR-16 lamp fixture head that has a very clean line, a glass handle and is fully adjustable. Over 40 different shades from glass to satin nickel can be changed to provide a custom look.
- The TwinRail Cloud, designed for Kay's 17-year-old son over his pool table, is two levels of custom bent chrome TwinRail with steel airplanes, balloons, sun and a parachute hanging from it. "When I first described it to him," Kay recalls, "he didn't like the idea of airplanes and balloons in his adult room. But when it was installed, he thought it was cool."