

#6

Queen Coin: The inscrutable Rimel once worked as an emergency-room nurse; today, as head of the Pew, she makes decisions that mean life or death for grant supplicants.



REBECCA RIMEL

DOESN'T GIVE ANYTHING AWAY

The smiling sphinx at the helm of the Pew Charitable Trusts seems to become less knowable as her philanthropic power grows

BY SABRINA RUBIN ERDELY

THE SITUATION IS ALL TOO FAMILIAR TO REBECCA RIMEL: SHE'S ensconced in her corner office with a cautious smile, facing someone who wants something from her. Nobody comes to her without wanting something—mostly, money. From the smallest nonprofit group to the largest university, they all journey here, to the Pew Charitable Trusts' headquarters 17 floors above 20th and Market streets, trying to keep the desperation out of their voices as they beg for slivers of the foundation's \$4.8 billion pie. Rebecca Rimel (pronounced RYE-mul) has learned how to deflect them gracefully. She has mastered the warm, soothing tones that distract attention from her guarded eyes. The result is a demeanor so amicable, yet so controlled, that supplicants can hardly guess at the Pew's answer. Rebecca Rimel may be a philanthropist, but she doesn't give *anything* away.

Seated in a seashell-pink armchair, Rimel, 48, practically shimmers in a pale pink suit, pale bobbed hair, and pale shadow over her heavily lidded eyes. With her demure looks and muted Virginia twang, she doesn't seem like someone whose name makes potential grantees break out in a cold sweat, whose critics speak in whispers. But as president and CEO of the region's largest foundation—the

nation's sixth biggest giver—Rimel is a widely feared woman who has clout with everyone from Washington politicians to corporate heads to Ed Rendell and Tom Ridge. People don't just listen when Rimel talks; they hang on her every word.

"I'm sitting here saying to myself, 'Who is she talking about?'" Rimel says with a practiced chuckle, responding to my suggestion that she is a heavy hitter. "I don't say that in any sort of disingenuous way," she adds, noting my skepticism. "I'm very proud that the institution has grown the way it has. I see my role as a person who facilitates that, who makes sure we're always acting under the directive of the board." Rimel folds her hands in her lap. She knows she isn't giving me what I want: a glimpse of herself. The region's most powerful controller of charitable funds, she is also the most self-effacing, compulsively shunning the spotlight even as she has raised the Pew's national profile. And the more substantially Rimel changes the Pew—altering the landscape of American philanthropy—the more her inscrutability makes people nervous. The Pew used to be so predictable. Now, cash-strapped organizations worry that they don't quite understand the startling new personality of the Charitable Trusts, (continued on page 176)

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BLACK POWER

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\$1 million in Chappell's United Bank, and last August, Chappell bought two shuttered First Union branches; Crawley's marketing firm secured a one-year consulting contract; First Union advertises in the black media and also set up a \$100 million charitable foundation to which the NAACP and other nonprofits apply; and a black former CoreStates board member is now a First Union director. In other efforts, the group has met with SEPTA to develop a plan for businesses hurt by ongoing construction in black commercial districts, advised welfare officials about jobs programs, encouraged the census bureau to hire black workers with ties to the neighborhoods, and met with private companies to learn of contracts coming up for bid.

"When these people speak, they speak for a lot of us, even the politicians," says Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell, whose West Philadelphia district would have suffered if United had not purchased two of the bank branches First Union planned to close. "They are active and committed and represent a lot of interests, and that carries a lot of meaning."

Some observers cite the First Union deals

as evidence the group is self-serving. But this gathering of business leaders—which meets about once a month and shuns any formal joint identity—is just one example of the new black power. A collection of black leaders also convenes in former mayoral candidate Charlie Bowser's office, coalescing around political issues like the disputed nomination of Federa Massiah-Jackson to the federal bench. And an "alliance" that addresses education and other social issues often gathers at the behest of the Reverend Robert Shine Sr., of the Black Clergy. The same core of about 15 African-Americans has a presence in each of these groups. And though the wrangling is now behind closed doors, the implication is still of a mass following: Bogle's newspaper readers, Shine's churchgoers, active members of the NAACP—all of whom could be mobilized if mobilization is needed. It rarely is.

"You don't see the Ron Rubins of the world standing out on a street corner or demonstrating outside of City Hall or the Chamber of Commerce or any other institution," Crawley explains. This is what he and many of his colleagues once had to do. "Now, we're integrated into the so-called power structure of the city." **T**

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REBECCA RIMEL

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and fret that such ignorance could cost them their funding. And so they look to Rimel for clues.

But she won't give. "I kind of see myself as the conductor, walking up and down the cars of the train, making sure everything's staying the course," she explains in her soft voice. "And that's why I really don't have a public persona. It's partly the nature of who I am and partly how I see my role in this institution. Yes, I am running the institution, but when I speak, I speak for the institution."

From a nearby chair, Rimel's public relations person lifts her eyebrows meaningfully. She warned me before this rare hour-long interview not to ask questions of her client that require first-person answers.

I'd known to expect this sort of evasiveness, since Rimel's reticence is legendary. Still, I never dreamed just how little she is willing to reveal. Anxiously, I scan the large office for hints of Rimel's non-Pew persona. There's a copy of *The Little Engine That Could* propped up on a bookshelf. That might mean something. There are photographs hanging above her desk, but they're too far away for me to

be able to make out the faces.

There's also a framed photo of two pigs. When I ask about it, Rimel bursts into laughter. "They're all over this office!" she exclaims, pointing out other porcine ornaments: a carved wooden one on a shelf, a big bronze one on the glass coffee table between us.

The publicist interjects: "I told you!"

"I know, you keep telling me I should purge my office," Rimel says. She points at the ceiling. "I used to have a pig mobile right here, but they made me take it down. I think it's my Southern upbringing. Periodically they'll come in"—she indicates her publicist—"and put them all in a drawer. And then they have a way of working their way back out!" The publicist covers her face in mock embarrassment, and Rimel belts out another laugh. But before I can evaluate how to run with this oddly personal revelation—should I ask about her childhood?—the moment passes. Her hands re-fold, and she returns to cruise control.

So here is what I know so far: Rebecca Rimel has a thing for pigs—a factoid non-profits everywhere will surely now be deconstructing for whatever insight it offers into the woman who holds their future in her carefully folded hands.

How does one measure a person's power? In the amount of money she controls? The number of people who depend on her? The number of phone calls it takes to reach her? How quickly her calls get returned? Rebecca Rimel holds up against all these yardsticks, plus one more: She's so powerful that most people are too skittish to say even *nice* things about her. The notion of falling out of Rimel's favor inspires the worst sort of paranoia among nonprofit organizations. One source I spoke with was reluctantly revealing concerns about the Pew's direction when she suddenly had to hang up, citing a "crisis"—then never accepted my calls again.

"You're not going to get anyone who will talk to you openly and honestly, on the record, to say good or bad things," she had nervously advised me. "When it comes to your funding, you just don't want to risk it."

It's no wonder supplicants are anxious. Federal funding has been steadily shrinking since the '80s, and corporate giving has leveled off. Together, those facts mean that organizations involved in the arts, social and health services, education, religion and the environment are more dependent on foundation gifts than ever. But there is only so much funding to go around. In that context, the ever-increasing commitment of the Pew—which is doling out \$230 million this year—is more precious than ever.

Faced with more demands for money, foundations, including the Pew, have been rethinking their giving. And since Rebecca Rimel was named the Pew's president in 1994—but reaching back to 1988, when she became the Trusts' executive director—she has implemented changes that have set the world of philanthropy aflame. Under her direction, the Pew has transformed from a traditional, low-key institution to a dynamic one, a corporate entity with an eye on the bottom line. It's become an organization that doesn't just give money away, but "invests" in hot-button causes.

"Here she's taken a relatively sleepy, Philadelphia-focused, conservative foundation, and turned it into a national, activist-oriented, rather daring organization," praised one observer, adding slyly, "If her board really had a good idea of what they have become, they'd be shocked."

Rimel's changes have been swift, leaving industry watchers and grant recipients reeling. Critics on the right complain that the Pew's newfound agenda is too liberal. On the left, the cry is that the Pew exerts too much control over grantees. Local observers wonder if, given the Pew's new national focus, it will lose sight of regional needs. And prospective grantees everywhere wonder if its "strategic investment" philanthropic method will translate into

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REBECCA RIMEL

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Understanding how the Pew Charitable Trusts think has never been so crucial to nonprofits. Which makes Rebecca Rimel's refusal to be known all the more frustrating.

About 40 minutes into my meeting with Rimel, I decide to go for it. We've been getting on fairly well. Rimel has been agreeably fielding questions about the Pew's role and the controversy it has inspired. Besides the pig revelation, we even digress once more, to briefly discuss escaped convict Norman Johnston; Rimel expresses concern that he is hiding out near where she'll be vacationing. (I restrain myself from asking for details). I sense we're making some headway. So I toss my notepad aside and ask if there's anything, anything of a personal nature that she feels comfortable discussing.

Rimel laughs, with false cheer. "Well, I would only say that moving here as a Southerner, I was very skeptical about how welcoming Philadelphia would be. And I can honestly say that there's nowhere, other than Charlottesville"—she smiles radiantly—"that I'd rather live." Her smile fades. "That's probably not a fair answer," she admits. "Was there anything in particular—I hate to give you this opening..." She braces herself, gripping the arms of her chair.

I try something benign. I know she's a gardening enthusiast. "Hobbies?" I ask. Rimel regards me warily. I try again, a long shot. "Husband?" I already know that in 1995, she married Patrick Caldwell, a manufacturer's representative. There's a tense pause. My throat suddenly feels dry.

"Favorite joke?" I ask weakly. Rimel doesn't crack a smile. A long pause.

"Well. Really, what you see is pretty much what you get," Rimel finally tells me. "I am a private person." She manages to flash the no-hard-feelings grin of an unusual philanthropist—one who has grown more powerful by learning how to say no.

Rebecca Rimel's past is hardly typical of a foundation head. She wasn't culled from the well-connected network of Ivy Leaguers, charity-ball regulars and prestigious family names that generally generates highbrow do-gooders. She was once an emergency-room nurse in Charlottesville, Virginia. Her father drove trucks for the local Coca-Cola bottling company and later became Charlottesville's parks superintendent; her mother was a homemaker. Willful and driven, Rebecca Rimel was the first in her family to attend college, and in 1973 graduated from the University

of Virginia, a member of the historically all-male school's first class to admit women.

Her ambition was considerable. Rimel didn't just become a nurse after college; she became a nurse practitioner and head nurse of the University of Virginia Hospital emergency room. She did research on the long-term effects of minor head injuries, authoring articles for medical journals and securing foundation grants—including one from the Pew Charitable Trusts. And Rimel became the first nurse to join the faculty of the university's medical school.

After a while, though, she grew restless. While debating her next move, she earned an MBA from James Madison University and won the prestigious Kellogg National Fellowship for emerging leaders in various fields—in her case, neuroscience. But her involvement with the sciences was about to shunt her onto a wholly different career path, through neurosurgeon Thomas Langfitt. Langfitt met Rimel in 1979 and took an interest in her head-injury studies, helping her apply for research grants, including some from the Pew Charitable Trusts, where he happened to be a board member.

At the time, the Pew was a bastion of low-profile giving. Founded by the children of Sun Oil Company founder Joseph Pew, the Trusts are seven funds, established between 1948 and 1979. In deference to the family's Presbyterian sentiments, the Pew's early gifts were made anonymously and focused largely on public health and welfare. Through the years, the Pew had become an important force in the Philadelphia region—a dependable, conservative organization that stayed true to its founding family's wishes. Rebecca Rimel's good sense and hardworking ethic seemed a perfect match for the Pew, and in 1983, she came to Philadelphia to become its health sciences program director.

Within two years, she was vice president in charge of the health and human services, religion and conservation departments. In 1987, her mentor, Langfitt, became president, and in 1988 he chose Rimel as his executive director, provoking protests within the Trusts from some who felt she was still an outsider in the foundation world. But the board backed Rimel's appointment, and by the time Langfitt retired in 1994, leaving Rimel the presidency, she already had the reins in hand.

Her ascendancy was a testament to her brains, her ability, the respect she commanded. But it was in no small part due to what is perhaps her greatest skill: diplomacy. Rimel's down-home Southern manner puts people at ease; her soft-spoken style belies the force of her convictions and the assertiveness of her ideas. Her enthusiasm is infectious. She's likable. On top of it all, Rimel is able to deftly size up

any situation. "She does a great job of coaching her board, knowing when to push, when to hold back," says an observer. "It helps that she's this steel magnolia with this kind of 'Aw, shucks' charm, which plays well. She gets more done than if she was a brassy New York type—although deep down, she's tough. She just packages it nicely in a gingham dress."

Her acuity and tact seem to have made Rimel's relationship with her nine fellow board members—six of whom are Pews—exceptionally smooth, and help explain how she's been able to transform the Pew in so short a time. Of course, in Rimel's retelling of the rebirth, the *board* suggested the changes, directives that she dutifully followed. It's a version of events few believe.

"The policies and outlook of Pew have been linked with Rebecca since she got there," says a philanthropy insider. "It's all Rebecca."

With Rimel as president, the foundation Philadelphia had come to know so well became a national sensation. It sponsored a week-end-long Congressional retreat, hoping to foster a sense of civility on Capitol Hill. It backed the President's Summit for America's Future to spur volunteerism. The Pew provided forums for citizens to speak out about Social Security and campaign finance, and encouraged religious congregations to get involved in public policy. It funded "civic journalism" programs, which utilize media outlets to encourage citizen participation.

The Pew Charitable Trusts also tackled the issue of how to effectively allocate their money. The answer was in "strategic philanthropy," an investment-oriented approach in which the foundation considers each grant request with regard to how pressing and timely it is, and whether Pew money will truly make a large-scale difference. This continues to attract attention, not only because it means more Pew money is being divided up among fewer recipients—a rather risky philanthropic model—but also because the concept of a foundation being so corporate-minded in its giving seems nothing short of radical. The final component in the Pew's makeover was its visibility. For the first time, the Pew was not only identifying issues it deemed important, but was actually starting organizations of its own to address them—such as the Pew Center on Global Climate Change and the Pew Center for Civic Journalism—heralding a significant shift for an institution whose gifts were originally anonymous.

Once they recovered from their initial shock, many industry watchers applauded the Pew's new assertiveness, and other foundations quietly took notes. But the Pew

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REBECCA RIMEL

has not been without its critics.

"They're trying to influence public opinion without being up-front about what their own values are," says a philanthropy insider. "Really, is this a role Pew is equipped to handle?" Detractors have pointed out that by dangling dollars before cash-poor groups, the Pew may indeed be swaying national opinion—in whatever ways it desires. In the case of civic journalism, for example, critics note that accepting outside money could compromise a newspaper's objectivity. Such influence has also been a concern in the environmental realm, where the Pew is now the nation's most prolific private funder. The issues it supports have been mostly crowd-pleasers, such as preserving old-growth forests and protecting swordfish from overfishing. But sometimes its stances can be controversial, as when the Pew decided to favor compromise with Pacific Northwest loggers, bitterly dividing conservation groups.

And while many watchers have lauded the evolution of "Pew" as a brand—by incorporating its name into its spin-off organizations, it makes use of a smart, modern advertising technique—some have questioned the wisdom of the foundation diverting badly needed funds from already existing groups to ones of its own design.

"It's pure egotism!" cries an arts source.

In addition, some critics note that the Pew spends a good chunk of money on surveys and polls, in order to take the national pulse. In its biggest research effort yet, for example, this past August, the Pew announced a plan to devote 40 percent of its culture budget for the next five years—\$50 million—to studying the value of culture. The results, according to the foundation, can be used to secure government funding for the arts and strengthen the arts community in a meaningful, long-term way. Many people have praised the initiative as a prime example of the Pew's thoughtful, practical planning. But others feel the new initiative is a waste. "There's no question that the arts in America are terribly underfunded, and need to be made a priority," laments a member of the arts community. "So Pew is going to spend all this time and money so that it can say, 'The arts are important, but are terribly underfunded.' Duh! Meanwhile, that \$50 million could have been distributed to a dozen arts organizations, to help them survive for the next decade!"

Still, such a research-driven approach has worked well for the Pew in the past, as exemplified by its two largest local investments under Rimel. The first came in 1996,

when, heartened by an economic study on the regional benefits of tourism, the foundation invested \$6 million to help create the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation. A year later, GPTMC unveiled a major ad campaign, "Philadelphia: The Place That Loves You Back," that helped prompt tourists to inject nearly \$100 million into the local economy. The Pew then announced its support of Independence Mall's Gateway Visitors Center—and later created a stir when, against Mayor Rendell's recommendation, Rimel refused to honor the Pew's \$10 million pledge unless Governor Ridge provided matching funds. Some were taken aback at Rimel's audacity; those who knew her, however, weren't surprised. "She's got nerves of steel," notes an admirer. In the end, Ridge gave in.

The Pew's new persona has been a source of local controversy in other arenas. Grantees worry about the increasing difficulty of securing funds, since they now not only have to demonstrate need, but also must convince the Pew that they are wise investments. In 1996, the Pew announced that organizations with operating deficits would no longer qualify for grants, and mass panic ensued in the notoriously fiscally unstable arts community. Many groups had to be bailed out by their boards. Others, including the Opera Company, were fortunate enough to be saved by individual donors coughing up hundreds of thousands of dollars. Still others weren't so lucky. The Philadelphia Orchestra became the new policy's first high-profile casualty, denied a grant due to its deficit. Last year, the Pennsylvania Ballet, the Mann Center and Philadanco were all turned down for Pew grants.

Some panicked artists took the Pew's tough-love stance as a sign of its flagging interest in the arts. "Bottom-line, they're denying money to those who need it most," says an arts source. But other observers feel the policy was a blessing in disguise, since it forced the arts community to balance budgets and come up with sound financial plans. "No one is entitled to a grant," says Orchestra president Joseph Kluger. "Those people who have painted the Pew Trusts as imposing unreasonable guidelines are operating under a philosophy that isn't healthy for the organization."

Though the Pew has, in fact, generously continued funding the arts, even incorporating changes that enhance its gifts—such as multi-year grants—the question of its commitment recently surfaced again, this time in regard to the Regional Performing Arts Center. Billed as the future centerpiece for the Avenue of the Arts, RPAC will serve as a performance space for seven organizations, including the Orchestra, the Concerto Soloists and the Philadelphia Chamber

Music Society. The William Penn Foundation enthusiastically donated \$13.1 million to the project, and a handful of smaller foundations chipped in as well. And then, surprisingly, the Pew turned RPAC down. The foundation reportedly was unsatisfied with RPAC's business plan, concluding that after construction costs, insufficient funds would remain for operation. It was a practical-sounding objection, but it started tongues wagging. "Pew outlined the problem, and it was within their power to provide a solution: an endowment," remarks an arts-world insider, adding that \$3 million of William Penn's contribution was earmarked for an endowment—"So it obviously wasn't just the business plan that bothered them."

It has been theorized that the real reason for the denial has to do with Rebecca Rimel's desire to appease the Pew's board. R. Anderson "Andy" Pew, chairman of the Trusts, has for years been vocal in his opposition to RPAC. Smitten with the romance of the Academy of Music, Andy Pew has strongly articulated his commitment to the Academy as the Orchestra's home, putting money where his mouth is; the Pew contributed millions to the hall's fruitless restoration efforts. After all the hoopla, could the Pew have swallowed its pride and supported RPAC? And so, some have suggested, in informing her board that RPAC's plans weren't up to par, Rimel was simply telling them what they wanted to hear.

"It all goes back to how inscrutable Rebecca is," grumbles an arts source. "That, and how inscrutable Pew has become."

Why, if she is so invested in influencing the public, is Rimel such a reluctant public figure? Perhaps it's just an old-fashioned style of philanthropy, a desire to be gracious and reserved, not in-your-face. But while that argument might hold for some foundations—William Penn, for instance, whose name doesn't even reflect its control by the Haas family—it's not one that suits the current incarnation of the Pew Charitable Trusts. Slapping the Pew name on everything in sight and selecting high-profile issues is not quite the definition of reserve.

Could it be that Rebecca Rimel, the woman who strikes fear into the hearts of so many grantees, is actually—shy? It would explain her guardedness. Whether genuine or not, the appearance of shyness works to Rimel's advantage at Pew. For although foundations are multibillion-dollar organizations, they're still family-run places, mom-and-pop shops at heart, not keen on outsiders telling them how to run the store. Rimel instinctively knows never to outshine the Pew family. She leads her board forward with the power of suggestion, then praises

them for "their" brilliant ideas. She expresses reluctance to be portrayed as an independent entity, and then is credited for being a team player.

Maybe Rimel's reticence is also a function of her femaleness; as it happens, many of this city's most powerful women are reticent people. As a woman, it can be a challenge to be treated as an equal in the business realm, where it's difficult enough to be taken seriously without the complications of colleagues, employees and rivals viewing you through the filter of your personal life. Relationships, marriage, divorce, babies, personal crises and triumphs, likes and dislikes—all these can poke holes in your armor, expose your weaknesses, open you to potential criticisms and undue hurt. Refusing to reveal your personal life may be a way for a woman of Rebecca Rimel's stature to maintain a level of untouchability that's not needed by her male counterparts.

I suggest this theory to Rimel. "Could be," she says distractedly, pursing her lips with thought. "But I think the flip side of that is, there's much more interest in [powerful] women and their personal lives. Because they're such a mystery, 'cause there are so few of them. So turn that question around and say, Look at the men on the list [of powerful people]—how much interest is there in finding out about their personal lives? Because, I find, people are really more interested in us, which makes us more guarded." Rimel maintains that gender has never been an issue for her—except once, in the early '80s, when she arrived for lunch at the Union League and had to enter through the basement door. "I've never felt, in this institution, that my femaleness was a detriment or an asset," she says. "Just a fact of life, nothing more."

But among Rimel's greatest assets at the Pew are her soft-spokenness, her subdued nature that suggests a certain vulnerability—and aren't these traits most acceptable in a woman? If Rebecca Rimel were a man, would anyone believe her to be merely a mouthpiece of the board, or would it be obvious that she, and no one else, is the aggressive force behind the Pew's transformation? Given the Trusts' team-player mentality, that sort of attention would sabotage the very dynamic that allows Rimel to lead the institution effectively. Seen through that lens, Rimel's femaleness is more than a mere "fact of life"—it's a crucial part of her leadership of the Trusts.

"My life is the Pew," Rimel says, trying somehow to answer my inquiries. "And you want to talk about personal life?" She forces a laugh. "We're all working more than we're with our loved ones! So you bet-



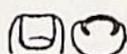
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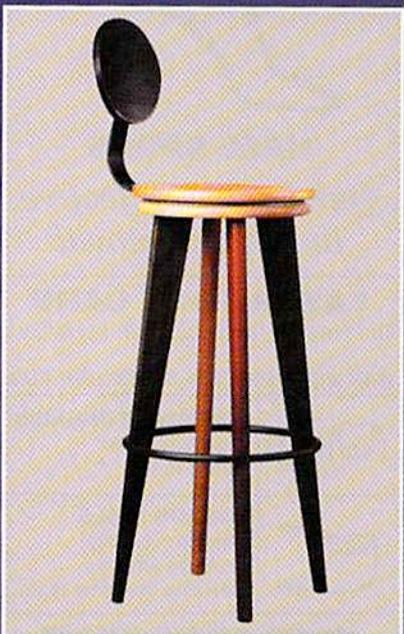
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REBECCA RIMEL

ter be having fun with what you do." She gives a firm nod of her head. "And that's about as personal as I can get."

Minutes later, Rimel is shaking my hand and guiding me to the door. Her smile is as radiant as ever; her manners are impeccably polite. She thanks me for my interest, enthusiastically agrees to another interview, and offers whatever help she can give. "Do follow up with us," she says

warmly, making meaningful eye contact. "I look forward to it."

I leave feeling rather pleased. I embark upon a busy month making calls, doing research, trying to glean whatever information I can about Rimel and the Pew. I speak repeatedly with Rimel's press office, trying to get the assistance she had promised and schedule a follow-up interview. Her publicist continually, nicely, tells me how crowded Rimel's schedule is.

It takes some time for it to dawn on me that Rimel has completely blown me off. **T**

BRIAN ROBERTS

(continued from page 107)

what it is. Ten years ago, this woulda been, what? Ginsu Knives at 4 a.m.? This is a store that morphs itself any time it wants. Pokémon cards. Then, boom, live from Ireland. Then 65,000 pairs of Birkenstocks. Then the Gold Hour. Our stock took a 20 percent nosedive the day we bought QVC out. Wall Street's major media analyst called to say it was the biggest mistake we'd ever make. Then a mutual fund that had a chunk of us called and said they were bailing."

"Why?"

He throws up his hands. "When everything.com goes through the roof, it makes for sticker shock for brick-and-mortar companies. They just didn't get QVC's morphability. Or that the 'Net is changing the public's feeling of safety about buying this way."

"Morphability' makes it sound like a web site. Ever think about—"

Roberts interrupts with a grimace. Comcast, the nation's third-largest provider of cable, may well become a leading Internet provider by the early 21st century—if the 'Net goes truly cable. It's also 11-percent owned by Bill Gates—Mr. Virtual. But Brian Roberts, for the moment, is a brick-and-mortar guy. "QVC's better on TV. Like I was saying, I'm not a man of vision; I don't know what the 'new paradigm' is, or what next year'll bring. I know Amazon.com's a great stock, but QVC will do over 85 million packages this year. That's four straight quarters of 30 percent cash growth. The web's where you go to buy. This"—he beams Joan Rivers a last admiring glance before turning her off—"is where you go to shop."

"Shopping's sexier?"

Roberts gives me a "You-got-it" index finger. "The Internet is: Get an idea, put it out quick, and hope you're the next Yahoo. But Americans really want three things: TV. Sports. Shopping. My dad taught me that." He pauses meaningfully. "Long time ago."

Brian Roberts's 35th-floor office at 15th and Market is one of two corner spaces face-to-face with Billy Penn atop City Hall. In the other sits his father, Ralph, who started Comcast—and, in essence, the cable industry—with the purchase of a few Mississippi television antennae in 1963. The rap on Brian: His ascension was nepotism, and his presidency is a rubber stamp. It's a perception he does little to counter publicly. "But it's ridiculous," says Safeguard CEO Pete Musser, who sold Ralph his first antenna and steered QVC the Roberts' way. "Brian Roberts is one of the four or five great businessmen in America."

Roberts is the definition of "haimish"—untranslatable Yiddish, though essentially it means "human." Minutes after we shake hands, I feel completely at home. In published quotes and sound bites, he can seem awfully formal, terse, goyish, and his photos make him look like a gangly nebbish. In person, though, he's six-foot-one, an All-American squash player, extremely lithe and physically impressive, and his manner of speech is exactly the same: surprisingly demotic, free of cliché and corporate alibi. Over three hours, I get to ask about 10 percent of the questions I've come in with, and he only stops talking because the Philadelphia 2000 Committee, which he hosts here, is waiting in a conference room.

But I had a hell of a time getting into this office. Brian Roberts, 40, really didn't want to be in a *Philadelphia Magazine* devoted to power. I'd thought it false modesty, a Roberts specialty: The family, "famous cheapskates" in the local philanthropic world, actually gives hugely, off the record. But Brian's aversion to a public association with power goes deeper than I'd imagined.

"I don't know what it is," he says. "I never think about getting it or using it. I'm a believer in knowledge, if that's power, and I enable people who know their work." He reels off a list of a half-dozen men below him who he says are Comcast's "real movers and shakers. My dad's a truly powerful man, because he's the greatest decision-maker I've