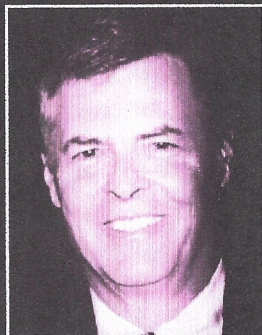


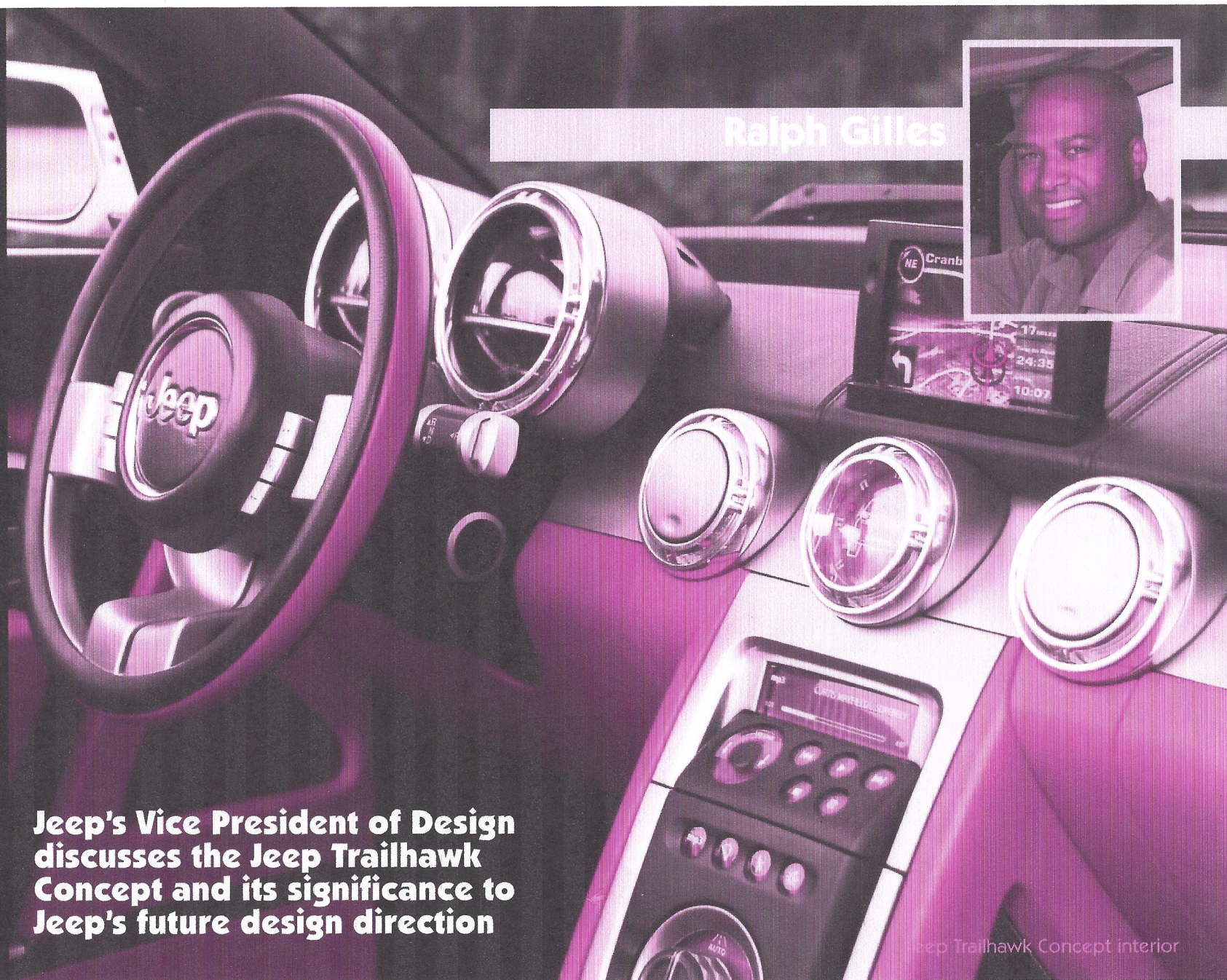
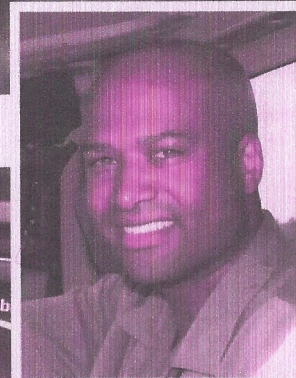
design on the road

Gary Witzenburg



Jeep's Vice President of Design discusses the Jeep Trailhawk Concept and its significance to Jeep's future design direction

Ralph Gilles



Jeep Trailhawk Concept interior

“Jeep is one of the most powerful brand names in the world, so that is something we have to take care of.”

A native of New York, New York, Ralph Gilles grew up in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, earned his Bachelor's degree in Transportation Design at Detroit's Center for Creative Studies, and a Master's in Business Administration from Michigan State University. Best known as design director of the popular rear-drive Chrysler 300C, Dodge Magnum, and Charger, he has also worked on a number of concept vehicles and production designs including the 2002 Jeep Liberty and 2003 Dodge Viper. He was appointed Director of Truck Design in 2005 and promoted to Vice President, Jeep/Truck, Color and Trim and Specialty Vehicles in 2006.

We caught up to him at a Chrysler 2008-model media preview to discuss his very cool-looking Jeep Trailhawk concept and its significance to Jeep's future design direction.



Jeep Trailhawk Concept



AT: First, we have to ask how it feels to be entrusted with design of the Jeep icon?

RG: It's very humbling, and my biggest mission is first to understand Jeep. I've done minivans and trucks but come mostly from a passenger car background. I went to the Easter weekend Jeep event at Moab [Utah] this spring and learned a lot about the Jeep culture, Jeep aficionados, and how the Wrangler DNA permeates the whole brand. It was awesome!

AT: Given that awesome responsibility, do you sleep well at night?

RG: That's like asking an athlete if he's nervous before a game. You get used to it after a while. I turn that nervousness and anxiety into determination, surround myself with an extremely competent team, and don't let anything get in my way.

AT: When designers start a new project, there are usually some words on the wall that capture the mission and vision. Can you share those words for the Trailhawk project?

RG: We do have exactly that...but no, I can't. It would give too much

away. It has a lot to do with vision, the end game, what we want to be when we grow up. And it has a lot to do with respecting the brand. Jeep is one of the most powerful brand names in the world, so that is something we have to take care of.

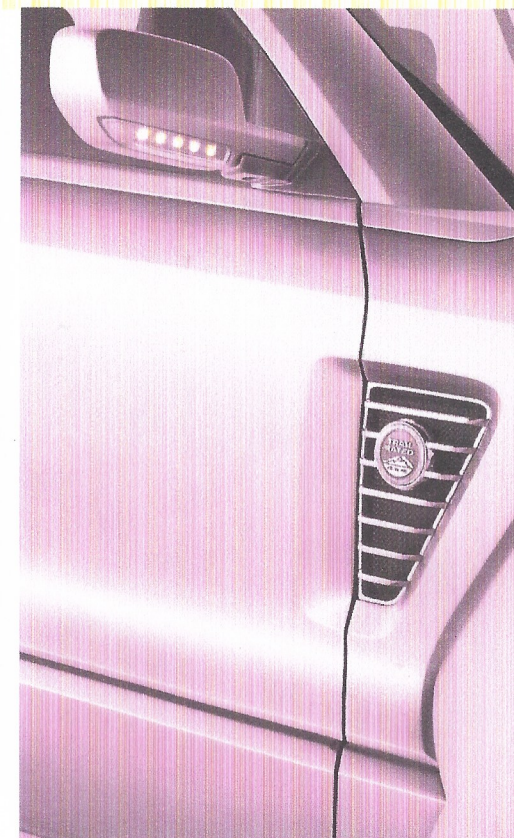
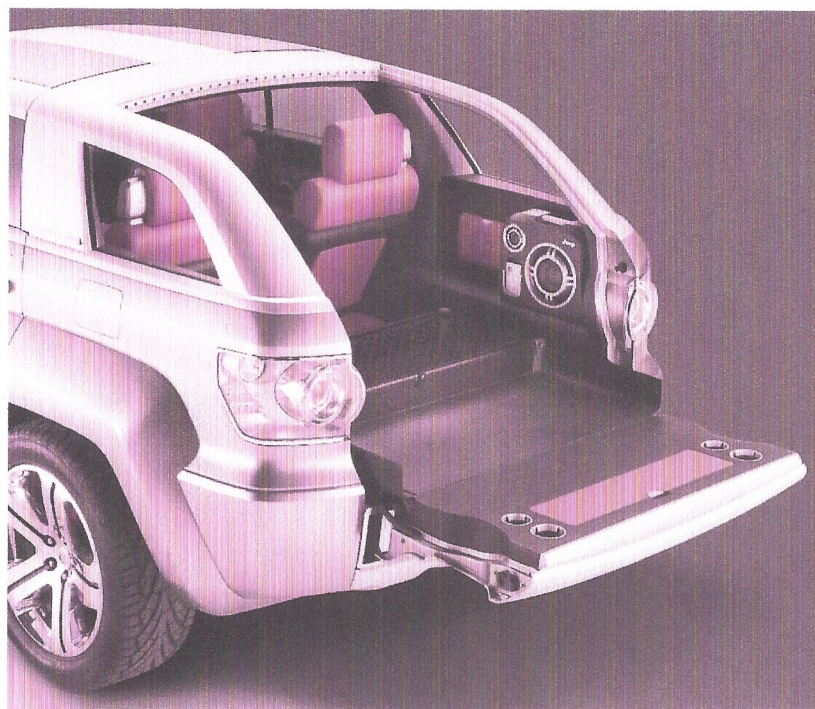
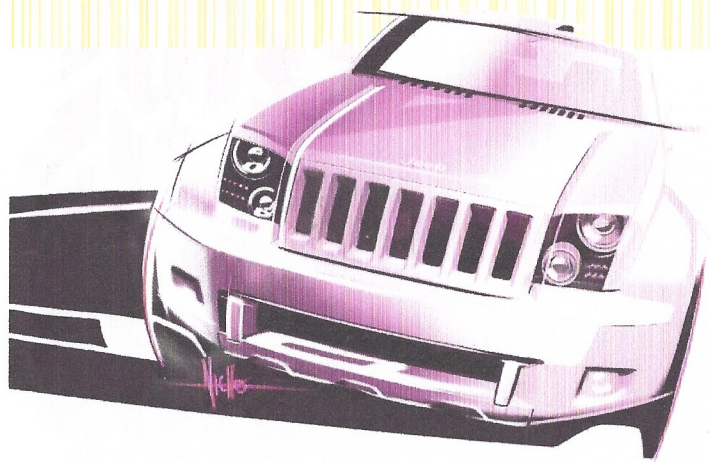
AT: What was the inspiration for this vehicle?

RG: It was a challenge from [Senior Design Vice President] Trevor Creed to see how far we could take the Wrangler platform. Looking at this vehicle, you would never imagine that it's on the ex-

tremely capable new Wrangler architecture and inherits its capability.

AT: Is it showing us where Jeep design is going, maybe previewing the next Grand Cherokee, or elements of it?

RG: I couldn't say so if it were. I wouldn't say this platform per se, but yes, the genre, the idea of a luxury off-road type of Jeep combining luxury and off-road capability. Look at our historical behavior. We have a lot of fun teasing you guys with future concepts.



AT: When doing a concept vehicle, you're empowered to be very creative. But is there also an element of, "could we do this in production?"

RG: Of course. But we won't choose not to show something because of that. If we stumble on a great idea, we're not going to deny the public seeing it just because we think it may be part of the future. We'll hide it in the concept, and it's your guess which things will make it all the way.

AT: Are elements of Trailhawk productionizable?

RG: Look at the stance, the details, the badging, and the way the colors are used. The two-toning is very intricate, and the interior is a very interesting application of premium. You'll notice a compass hidden in the instrument panel and a lot of innovation and clever ideas, which will inspire us as we go through the production process for the next generation of Jeeps.

AT: What are its best features?

RG: The stance, the attitude, the way it sits. For a designer, this new platform has a fantastic stance with a confident wheelbase and very short overhangs, which allows for some really cool proportions. And the front end is gorgeous with those hawk-like headlamps. But for me, the roof system is most fascinating. It offers an open-air experience in a different way, with full-length T-tops. It's basically a four-door convertible with

removable hatch glass, yet it's very structurally sound and safe for off-roading.

AT: What else is different or special?

RG: The tailgate is an innovative take on the Nitro's "load and go" that goes a step further and becomes kind of a picnic station with cupholders and the removable sound system from the Caliber. This vehicle is all about adventure, getting out there, and hangin' out.

AT: Anything else about the interior?

RG: The use of bling. You don't normally associate an off-road Jeep with luxury, but we tried to apply a lot of luxury to it in a very robust way. It looks very technical, very rugged, yet luxurious at the same time. We also tried some really bold colors.

AT: From a design standpoint, how do you respond to increasing competition from Hummer, Toyota FJ, and many others?

RG: We do what we've always done -- keep going in our own direction. You can look at competition and try to emulate it, or you can chart your own path. That's what we do.

AT: Do you have to deal with a lot of give-and-take with Engineering and Marketing?

RG: As a production program matures, the goal is to get where you can't tell the difference between Design and Engineering. They're all intoxicated by the vision and all talking the same thing.

AT: GM says its Design is now driving Engineering instead of the other way around. Is that happening at Chrysler?

RG: We've always been empowered. But on a Jeep, you have so many technical and functional objectives that you really have to listen to Engineering. You have to be careful to leave enough ground clearance, approach angle, and wheel space for articulation. There are so many critical things that make a Jeep a Jeep, that you have to respect engineering criteria.

AT: Chrysler's concept interiors are always showcases, but your production executions too often are not. How can you translate those rich concept interiors to production cars?

RG: We know how to do premium interiors, and [Chrysler President and CEO] Mr. Lasorda has challenged us to do exactly that. We're reorganizing our department and realigning our team to do it, and Engineering is doing the same. Starting much, much earlier and getting suppliers engaged much earlier gives us better results, which you will start seeing very soon.

AT: Where would you most love to drive this vehicle?

RG: After going to Moab for the first time, I can't get that area out of my mind. I love that part of America! It's so beautiful! One piece of trail called Lions Back



was unbelievable! You're on top of this hill, you look left, and you can't see anything. You look right, and you can't see anything. It really makes your heart beat! I can't believe how many times I looked at something and said there is no way we're going to do that, and the next thing I knew, I was looking behind me saying, I can't believe we just did that.

AT: What would be your ultimate Trailhawk destination?

RG: I would love to put this vehicle into context in Africa, maybe visit Kenya and drive it there. That would be sweet, a dream come true.

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