

BUSINESS

REAL DEALER: COINS,
STAMPS, AMERICANA

Quicksilver Coin Co. in Lake Forest offers a history lesson in value.

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Niels Christian Christensen does his best to challenge the more dismal stereotypes of his profession and instead emphasize the best of an unlikely and fascinating business. This professional dealer in coins and collectibles cheerfully welcomes customers new and old to his Lake Forest mom-and-pop coin shop. It's not a fusty, dusty pawnshop or dreary junk emporium. It's a bright and inviting dream reanimation factory, where believers or non-believers, skeptics or celebrants can find, if not something better from the past, something real from it, something authenticated, and get a fair and professional assessment of its value.

Even if you're not buying or selling, a visit to Quicksilver Coin Co. is an education, a real-life history lesson by way of learning the political economy of owning, collecting, losing, or acquiring the weird items that tell a story, true or apocryphal, of America or, more aptly, Americana.

The proprietor of this well-lit, cheerful establishment is fit, friendly and charismatic, the opposite of whom you'd expect *Central Casting* to select for his role. Christensen, 42, is a self-taught local with broad experiences in travel, business and, yes, surfing, whose expertise and honest business practices bring confidence and perhaps relief to clients, whether on the happy occasion of investing in their futures, betting on a crisis or, lately, the less jolly circumstance of cashing in on what's left of the past toward making this month's rent. Like many people inheriting from a family member, cleaning out the garage or otherwise discovering some hopeful souvenir, they are thinking wistfully that what they've discovered or been given must be, could be, might be, and should be worth something.

Christensen also works with sophisticated hobbyists, collectors and dealers such as Stack's Bowers Galleries and Sotheby's. The trained pros live and breathe the catalogs and reference books, know the exact monetary value of their product, as well as of their own labor and risk, and, just as Christensen does, reach for the Red Book (the numismatist's bible) to make sure.

One late morning, a conscientious local man visits Quicksilver to purchase another batch of col-



RALPH PALUMBO, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Niels Christian Christensen uses what he's learned to make quick studies of merchandise. He says he's made relatively few errors and seems to enjoy telling customers what they've got.

lectible coins, completing a series for his grandkids who likely have little idea of this legacy's meaning, built on trust and tradition. It's a disappearing one, no longer exactly coin of the inheritance realm. He's counting on them learning.

Then, challenging his own generation's unfamiliarity with numismatics, a calm, deliberate, sincere financial doomsayer arrives, a young fellow counting on, expecting even, the crash of the dollar. He's slowly been putting a dedicated portion of his savings into pure silver, hoping for the best while anticipating the worst. And having fun "playing the game." He departs with a stack of undeniably gleaming 100-percent-pure-silver fairy-tale beauties, gorgeous and a thrill to hold.

Tucked into a shopping complex adjacent to a Walgreens, Quicksilver has a reputation for dealing fairly, including with the fellow trying to sell Saddam Hussein's military uniform, no kidding. Christensen chose not to purchase, a calculated bet that certifying its authenticity would

be a loser. He assumed the only way to substantiate the seller's claim would be locating and then testing DNA on the garment, an expensive long shot at best.

Here, as for transactions big and small, Christensen uses judgment, smarts and credentials earned at what he calls graduation from the School of Hard Knocks. He's a quick study who's made relatively few errors and obviously enjoys dealing in the both solid and wistful merchandise of nostalgia and memory. That enthusiasm assures purchasers or sellers of sports memorabilia, coins, collectibles, toys, artifacts, and mementos of art, war and history, big and small moments, the whole crazy commodity carnival.

Indeed, the bright walls of his store feature fading military discharge papers, a signed Muhammad Ali poster, a Howdy Doody marionette, a classic cartoon animation cell, Olympic lapel pins and display cases offering rows of shiny individually sleeved coins, each inspiring greedy curiosity but demanding answers about value and quality.

Christensen, your host of this "Jeopardy!"-general-knowledge emporium has them. There's a narrative for all of their stuff, often a real one better than imagined. He's an autodidact, researcher and sleuth, starting with the store's naming, a reference not only to the surf line he favors but to the element used by miners and, as it happens, the misnamed Mercury dime, also called the Winged Liberty Head, which is the store's logo. The fancy Phrygian cap (a soft conical cap with the top pulled forward, associated in antiquity with the inhabitants of Phrygia, a region of central Anatolia) worn on the lovely head of young "Liberty" was confused with the winged one of the Roman god. The real-life model was Elsie Stevens, wife of U.S. poet Wallace Stevens. You can't make this stuff up.

Christensen is there, with his professional authentication and legitimacy to make sure you haven't, and that nobody else has, to protect, explain and authenticate what's genuine, and politely, professionally, reorient us to the value of reality.

LESSONS IN
LEADERSHIPA risk
may be
worth the
reward

In April, daredevil Nik Wallenda walked untethered atop Orlando's 400-foot Ferris wheel - as it was spinning. This is the same guy who traversed a tightrope across the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls and between two Chicago skyscrapers.

In an interview, Wallenda said he wants to be an inspiration for others. People don't need to risk their lives, he clarified, but they should push themselves to do better and be greater. One of the reasons we admire people who

take risks is that most of us are scared stiff at the prospect of taking risks ourselves. "I could never do something like that," we say. Sometimes it seems that the only people who can take risks successfully are the people who have nothing to lose.



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Fortunately, most of us will never have to worry about taking monumental risks. Of course, we use that to downplay the importance of the risks we do face. If it's not something that involves real, measurable danger - skydiving, for example - it's clearly not important as far as risks go. What you really mean is that you think the fear you feel about your "small" risk is misplaced - an over-reaction.

The same fear that keeps you from taking a tangible risk like skydiving can also keep you from seeking a promotion. It keeps you from going back to school to get your master's degree, or taking a vacation without checking messages every 45 minutes.

You don't call it fear, of course, but that's what it is. It's amazing how the human brain can be so effective at using circular reasoning and rationalization as a way to avoid taking action. In short, playing it safe isn't the way to get ahead. You've got to go out on a limb sometimes, but not so far that you fall off.

Intelligent risk-taking involves these steps:

- **Know your motivations.** What do you really want to achieve? Why? Don't take major chances on something you're not enthusiastic about. You'll work harder on goals that are important to you. Failure at something trivial may make you reluctant to try something really important to you.

- **Define success at the start.** Figure out what you want to achieve in specific, measurable terms. You don't have to account for every variable, but you should have a solid idea of the results you're looking for.

- **Look at the best and worst outcomes.** To evaluate risks and rewards, try to determine what the worst-case scenario would look like, whether the payoff is worth that risk and how you