

The Breckenridge

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ENTERTAINMENT

Gumpin' out with Steve Weber

This Santa Clara man took an old costume and a hunch to become the spokesman for a chain of Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. restaurants. And it worked.



Journal photo/Jane Stebbins
Steve Weber, aka Forrest Gump, talks with the running Forrest Gump (Sean Minnock) outside the Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., which opened this week in Breckenridge. And that's all we have to say about that.

By Jane Stebbins
Journal Managing Editor

Genetic luck, a bad haircut and well, the idiot part comes naturally.

That's what Steve Weber of Santa Clara, Calif., said was all that was needed for him to be lured from a sales rep job to playing the tourist attraction of Forrest Gump, the character popularized by Tom Hanks in the 1994 movie of the same name.

The resemblance is uncanny.

"Ever since Bosom Buddies came out, I've always been told, 'You look like that guy on Bosom Buddies,'" Weber said. "You know who you look like? You know who you look like? You know who you look like?"

From the blue eyes to the left ear that juts out just so, Weber knows he bears a striking resemblance to Hanks.

"And once I got this bad haircut, I found out I even had the right hairline," he says, wiggling his eyebrows to accentuate what would be a slightly

receding hairline if his hair was longer than the quarter-inch it is.

The constant reminders from friends inspired Weber in 1994 to sift through the offerings at his local Goodwill store and put together a Forrest Gump costume for Halloween. The blue checkered shirt, scuffed up Nikes and off-white suit were easy enough; Weber scoured antique stores until he found the old tan suitcase. But after that Halloween, he hung up the costume and returned to his work as a sales repre-

sentative for high-tech computer gizmos.

It wasn't until 1996 that his suit would see light again, when the Rusty Penguin teamed with Paramount Pictures to open Bubba Gump Shrimp Company in Monterey, to take advantage of the fervor created when Forrest Gump was released.

Weber recognized a sales potential when he saw one.

Please see **GUMP**, PAGE 24

Gump:

continued from PAGE 6

"We were getting calls from everyone, from everywhere about everything," said general manager Dave Trombetta. "And then this guy calls us and says he looks like Forrest Gump. We said, 'Yeah, whatever, come on down.' He got there, we looked up and our jaws just dropped. He bowled us over. I don't know if it was destiny ..."

"It was my destiny," Weber said.

Destiny is as destiny does.

Weber, who eventually would watch the movie more than 30 times to get Hanks' mannerisms and accent down, was hired on the spot.

"Gump" has been seen in the past two weeks throughout Summit County promoting the opening of Bubba Gump's Shrimp Company in the old Adam's Street Grill at Adams and Main streets in Breckenridge.

He's been walking about town, introducing himself to strangers — "Mama always told me not to talk to strangers," he'll say. "I'm Forrest. Forrest Gump. Now we're not strangers any more."

Gump wouldn't be complete, really, without his other self, the running Forrest, who, in the movie, for no apparent reason, started running and didn't quit for thousands of miles.

Decidedly different in appearance, with a filthy yellow T-shirt bearing a smiley face, a blue running suit and long hair, the running Forrest attracted as many fans as did the simple Forrest. Luckily for Trombetta, shortly after they hired Weber, Sean Minnock of Maui gave him a call. Like Weber, he's been told he resembles Tom Hanks. But he owns a company that conducts theme parties.

"It's unique," he said. "I get to see whole cities on foot. And cops have looked at me funny," he said, smiling. "Once I got stopped by one, and" — here, he slips into his Gump Southern accent — "I tried to tell him I'm here with Bubba Gump's Shrimp Company." The cop gets on his radio and says, "I'm here with Forrest Gump." I thought I was going to get a ticket."

Life is like a box of Russell Stover chocolates, Forrest.

When the two slip into character, it's hard to keep from smiling.

"Are you on your first date?" Weber asks an elderly couple walking down Adams Street. The woman smiles, pauses, as if she thinks, maybe, she recognizes this man. She turns to join her husband, who has ignored Weber as if he were panhandling. "I'd watch out for that man, ma'am. Like my mama always said, you never know what you're gonna get. You be careful."

Weber admits it took a bit of time to "get down the goofy wave, the accent, a lot of jerky movements and the key phrases" of his big-screen counterpart.

"It's easy to draw the line," he said, adding that he originally thought he might lose his identity.

He uses the word 'fine' a lot: "That's a fine team; that's a fine idea. If I meet someone named Jenny, I'll say, 'Jenny. Why, that's my favorite name in the wide world. She was like an angel, Jenny was.'"

Although the Rusty Penguin plans to open Bubba Gump's in New Orleans, Miami and Honolulu — Breckenridge was its fifth, and only landlocked eatery — Weber believes his life as Forrest will probably end with the last restaurant.

"Physically, I won't look the part," the 40-year-old said. "And that will end my career. Chubby Gump won't cut it. But for now, it's full time."

Minnock left Breckenridge this week, saying, "I'm perty tar'rd; I think Ah'll go home now."

Weber will stay on to promote Bubba Gump's and its offerings: barbecue shrimp, broiled shrimp, boiled shrimp, baked shrimp, dijon shrimp kabobs, shrimp creole, pan-fry shrimp, stir-fry shrimp, deep-fried shrimp, pineapple shrimp, shrimp salad, shrimp and potato, shrimp burger, shrimp salad.

One of these days, he'd like to go out on the town as Steve Weber, tourist.

"I've been able to go out incognito in the bigger cities," he said. "In two weeks, I'll be everybody's buddy."

A body could do a whole lot worse.