This time next year, Jon Radtke will be living and working in Oahu, Hawaii. As a longtime manager for Target stores around the Twin Cities metro area, the Ridgewater grad has made a name for himself within the corporation, and he emerged as the best person to head up the Hawaiian venture. “Target is going to open stores in Hawaii and Alaska, and I’ve been asked to go to Oahu and start setting up the store there and get the team hired,” he says, with some understatement. “I’m excited to be part of the rollout of that store.”

While the move is an honor, it’s only the latest in a long list of accomplishments for Radtke. A Target employee for nearly 15 years, he’s earned a host of awards, overseen the openings of numerous stores, and now manages the Minnetonka store, which is a company flagship. Considered a showcase operation, the store often draws reporters writing about Target for such publications as the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and Fortune magazine.

For as far as he’s come, however, Radtke hasn’t forgotten where he got his start. His retailing roots stretch back to small-town Minnesota—and are tightly linked with Ridgewater.

Retailing roots
Radtke’s retailing career got off to an early start. “I graduated from Lester Prairie High School in 1980 and started working in a grocery store when I was 16—stocking shelves, carrying out groceries, and cashiering,” he notes.

When his high school counselor suggested that Radtke was well suited to a career in sales and marketing, the new grad enrolled in the Marketing and Sales Management program at Ridgewater. The decision made sense. “I love working with people and the public and I’m pretty outgoing,” Radtke says. “I had worked in retail and liked it. Plus Ridgewater was close to home and I felt it could provide me with a great education—and it did. Money was a factor, too, because I have seven brothers and sisters, so it fit for financial reasons, as well.

“It was an awesome experience,” he adds. “The class size was great. There were 50 students in my high school graduating class, so I was nervous about going to a huge college and getting lost in the crowd. At Ridgewater, instructors took an interest in me and helped me to be a success in life.”
While in school, Radtke began working part time at a Kmart in Hutchinson. He liked it so much that he began planning to work with a major retailer once he finished school. He took the first step immediately after graduation, when Kmart offered him a position as an assistant manager. Thirteen years later, Target came calling. For Radtke, working for the Minneapolis-based retail giant has offered a steady diet of variety, along with a wealth of challenges and opportunities. “I love my job,” he says. “It’s exciting to come in every day. I’m a store team leader, which is like being a football coach. We have about 370 team members at the Minnetonka store, and it’s my job to lead the troops, to coach the team. I also go to colleges and recruit.”

Radtke started his Target career at a store in Chanhassen, and then moved to locations in Plymouth, St. Paul, West St. Paul, and Edina, before opening the Minnetonka store, which, he says, is referred to as the “moonshot store.” That designation, Radtke says, refers to “shooting for the moon” for ideas in everything from products to fixtures. “You start with an empty aisle and it’s like putting a puzzle together,” he says. “Then senior leadership comes in and looks at it and either approves or disapproves of it.”

Radtke says that working with each store’s employees is perhaps the most rewarding aspect of his job. “One of our leadership responsibilities is developing people,” he says. “We don’t manage people—we lead them. Each store has its own unique challenges, including getting the right team members in the right positions.”

“At Ridgewater, instructors took an interest in me and helped me to be a success in life.”

—Jon Radtke
He’s been successful in meeting those challenges. Since joining Target, he has earned a number of honors, including a “Best Team Player” designation at the company’s national sales meeting last August, the third time he has earned that honor. He also has earned seven Golden Contribution Awards for meeting financial goals, and five Guest Service Awards, which are the result of customers’ ratings of service for individual Target stores. “I also got the Best People Developer Award—that’s one of the best,” Radtke says. “It’s for assisting other teams. We do a lot of support, helping other teams open new stores. My current boss used to work for me; I’m proud of that. The vice president of operations used to work for me, too. It’s a great feeling to see people who worked for you—people who you helped develop—move up in the company.”

Radtke also works to ensure that Target’s customers—the “guests,” as Target refers to them—are well served. It’s an ever-shifting task. The retail environment has grown increasingly competitive in the last few years, and customers have a variety of shopping options to choose from. They demand low prices, big selections of goods, clean stores, and top-notch service. Radtke is constantly tracking changes in customers’ desires, including a big one these days: the need for speed. “They want to get in and out as fast as they can,” he says. “They don’t want to wait in line, so we analyze the fastest way to get them in and out of the store. For example, we promote that we’ll answer call boxes in 60 seconds. And the lanes are one-plus-one: One person being waited on and one person in line. If there is more than one person in line, we’ll call for backup. Service is a huge part of what we do. I want to make sure we’re delivering great guest service, because consumers go where they get the best service.”

Target, the second-largest general merchandise retailer in the United States, has been delivering on that front. The company is consistently recognized for everything from store design to social responsibility. Last year BusinessWeek named it one of the World’s Most Innovative Companies, while Fortune recognized it as one of America’s Most Admired Companies. The business isn’t resting on its laurels, however. It plans to have 2,010 stores open throughout the United States by the year 2010. The company currently has 1,350—meaning it will need to open more than 150 stores per year to hit its goal.

**Welcome to paradise**

Radtke is excited to be part of the process. Last summer, Target flew him and his wife, Colleen, who is a paraprofessional working with special needs students in Victoria, to Oahu so they could get an idea of where they would be living and working. “When you land, they say, ‘Welcome to paradise’—and it’s true,” he says. “I absolutely love Hawaii. When we were looking for housing and people found out I was with Target, they were ecstatic about us opening a store there.”

Radtke notes that the timing is right for the move. He and Colleen have two sons: Michael, a sophomore at St. John’s University, and Matthew, who recently graduated from the University of North Dakota’s aviation program and has started his career as a commercial pilot. With both sons firmly set on their college and career paths, there will be little upheaval in the household. Looking back on his career, Radtke credits Ridgewater with the educational foundation that has led to a successful career in retailing. “The speech classes in particular helped me immensely,” he says. “They really helped me to be comfortable standing up in front of people and to communicate effectively, to get my message across. One thing we look

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The knowledge that Radtke gained while attending Ridgewater, combined with his enthusiasm, his people skills, his keen sense of consumer needs, and the ability to develop his team members have all earned him high praise within Target. Where will he go after Hawaii? His immediate career goal, he says, is to open the Oahu store “with a huge success. I’ll open that store in March 2009. We will be out there for two to three years. Then I will look at where I want to be within Target.

“I will do this until I retire,” he adds. “Store team leader is a good niche for me; I have no aspirations to work my way up to headquarters. My niche is working with people and coaching the team.”

Vicki Stavig is a Bloomington-based freelance writer.