

February 15, 2008

How does the Center for Innovation come together?

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

How do all the pieces fit together at the Florida Center for Innovation? There's an intricate web, say leaders of life sciences and healthcare organizations.

Here's a look at their operations and how they fit together.

TORREY PINES

Construction is underway on the new 100,000-square-foot headquarters building for the Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies, with completion and move-in expected before the end of this year. The institute's scientists have set up temporary shop on the Fort Pierce campus of Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute.

Houghten expects to have more than 30 people working there within a month and up to 45 when they move to the new building. Torrey Pines has committed to add 189 jobs over 10 years as part of its deal with local governments.

Founded by Houghten in 1989, Torrey Pines is a not-for-profit research center that conducts basic research in fields associated with a wide variety of major medical conditions, including multiple sclerosis, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, pain, inflammation, AIDS and other infectious diseases, transplant rejection and rheumatoid arthritis.

Synergy with others is key to Torrey Pines' operations. The center's scientists discover and develop chemical compounds that are licensed to institutions and for-profit companies for development into drugs and introduction to the marketplace. Houghten also encourages his researchers to spin off companies and strike out on their own as entrepreneurs.

"It's very important that we get the right people, who are not afraid of risk, who understand that we need to collaborate," Houghten said. "We have collaborations now with Florida Atlantic University, the University of Florida, the University of Central Florida in Orlando, and the Scripps and Burnham institutes."

Houghten also looks for scientists who have government grants to fund their activities. He compares Torrey Pines to a large

shopping mall with storeowners. Just like mall stores, individual scientists can come and go without harming Torrey Pines.

The Torrey Pines leader says he remains involved in the science and adds that he wouldn't have come to the Treasure Coast just to be an administrator. He praises researchers who can translate his ideas into tangible compounds.

"Our discovery methods are focused on finding solutions faster and that's what drives me," Houghten said. "Here in Florida, we can develop world-class, drug-discovery methods. When you do something new, it's a rush when the light bulb goes on."

Houghten's crystal ball sees as many as 2,000 biotech workers at Tradition within 10 years, with possibly 10 times that many in ancillary jobs, including those who work in hotels, restaurants and shops.

"There is no cap or limitation on what this might become," Houghten said. "The best thing is that 10 years from now, 25 years from now, there will be many things happening at Tradition that we haven't even thought of yet."

VGTI

Houghten and Torrey Pines have worked with Oregon Health & Science University's Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute, known as VGTI, and its director, Jay Nelson, for more than 20 years.

Established in March 2001, VGTI and its scientists develop vaccines, along with novel immune and gene therapy programs, to fight infectious diseases such as AIDS, chronic viral infection-associated diseases, newly emerging viral diseases and infectious diseases of the elderly.

The university's research chief, Dan Dorsa, says all that remains for VGTI to begin its Tradition plans is a final grant agreement from the state of Florida.

Then, VGTI will plan a 130,000-square-foot building to be constructed over three years near Torrey Pines. In the interim, VGTI will occupy the third floor of the Torrey Pines building.

When completed, the VGTI facility is expected to create 200 high-value jobs over the next 10 years.

VGTI director Jay Nelson will oversee the Florida and Oregon facilities, but is looking for a Florida-based director to head day-to-day operations and work with Nelson on recruitment of scientists.

Dorsa reports that VGTI is already in discussion with several candidates, including several of whom he describes as having international stature.

Dorsa sees a thriving operation at Tradition. He hopes to have recruited all principal investigators -- the scientific leaders -- within five years. Some will be young investigators who build labs and write grants. Others will be senior people.

"I would hope we would have disclosures of intellectual property from them about discoveries they have made in Florida," Dorsa said.

Like Torrey Pines, VGTI encourages technology transfer, helping its researchers obtain patents, create companies, and get venture capitalists involved. VGTI licenses discoveries to the new company and grants the right to commercialize products, usually taking an equity position in the hope that revenues will flow to both the Florida and Oregon operations. Dorsa expects Florida companies to be created, as they have in the Pacific Northwest.

VGTI is looking forward to working with a proposed Martin Memorial Hospital on the Tradition site.

"We envision our Florida facility to be more clinically oriented with actual human trials," Dorsa said. "It would help us to have clinical labs and patients close by. Martin Memorial is already involved in clinical research, including cancer trials, and they are very interested in collaborating with us."

Dorsa also envisions that VGTI will link to Florida universities for research.

Like Houghten, he sees no reason Tradition can't someday match North Carolina and San Diego, but not in the next five years. He predicts a 10-to-20 year timeline, with an infusion of venture capital.

MANN RESEARCH CENTER

Mann Research Center brings to Tradition the long experience of the Alfred Mann Foundation in research and development of medical devices. The foundation was started in 1985 by Alfred Mann, the biotech entrepreneur and philanthropist whose for-profit companies were largely responsible for the cardiac pacemaker. The foundation's researchers are credited with major advances in insulin pumps for diabetics and cochlear implants for patients with severe hearing loss.

Mann Research Center is a real estate arm of the foundation that plans to build a life sciences complex at Tradition. Late last year, Mann closed on a 22-acre parcel where it intends to build up to six buildings, including 300,000 square feet of research and development facilities, with a small amount of support retail, and 100,000 square feet of medical office space.

John DelRusso, president of Mann Research Center, says he will work for the next three months on a marketing plan, reaching out to various companies and revising the master plan for the site as needed.

Interest in the site is high from potential tenants according to Jim Land, a vice president at Grubb & Ellis, the real estate company that is helping market the Mann site at Tradition. He says companies that need as little as 5,000 square feet and as much as 130,000 square feet are exploring possibilities.

"People want to be a part of anything Al Mann is involved in," Land said.

DelRusso said the pace of development over the next 12 months will depend on the companies that want to build there.

"We're still kicking around whether to build to suit or to build some space 'on spec' to attract smaller companies," DelRusso said. "We hope, with city approval, to break ground late this year or early next year."

DelRusso said he hopes that more than 1,000 jobs will be created at the Mann site within the first five years.

"This effort could be one of the high-job creators Florida has seen," DelRusso added.

Shared access will be a key part of the Mann development, according to DelRusso. Tenants will be able to share labs, science libraries, instruments, equipment, gas, ionized air, clean rooms, information technology services and cafeterias.

"We're hoping to create synergy among all our tenants," Land said "Our aim is innovation from the lab to the marketplace."

DelRusso hopes that several Alfred Mann companies will take space in Tradition.

Mann has the largest amount of square feet at Tradition under a single owner. DelRusso said his goal is to support the proposed Martin Memorial Hospital and other research efforts.

"We hope to also bring some new stuff to the table and get this innovation to flow from the laboratory to the marketplace," DelRusso said.

Both DelRusso and Land predict that other life sciences developments will be built in the area over the next 10 years, and that eventually, the corridor from Orlando to Palm Beach will rival San Diego.

MARTIN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Torrey Pines, VGTI and Mann say they need a hospital as part of the team at Tradition to provide much needed clinical trials. Stuart-based Martin Memorial Hospital wants to join the team.

State health officials have given preliminary approval for an 80-bed facility at Tradition that could be expanded to 300 beds.

The main obstacle is an appeal filed by Hospital Corp. of America, parent company of St. Lucie Medical Center and Lawnwood Regional Medical Center in Fort Pierce, which claims the Tradition hospital is not needed.

A hearing before a state administrative hearing officer is scheduled for November.

Mark Robitaille, senior vice president and chief operating officer of Martin Memorial, is the former chairman of the Economic

Development Council of St. Lucie County. He was involved from the very beginning in the planning for Tradition.

"We're confident our application will be approved," Robitaille said. "The Florida Agency for Health Care Administration looked at all the data, including the huge increase in population in western St. Lucie County, the need for emergency services out there, and a large increase in obstetrics case volume. Both the fire district and the city council support our application."

Robitaille anticipates more than 400 people will work at a Tradition hospital where average annual wages will exceed \$50,000. He says the hospital would be the largest economic development project in that area for many years, pumping more than \$100 million into the economy.

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Experience in different areas make Banks Clark nimble

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Like Jack, the candlestick jumper of nursery rhyme fame, Banks Clark is very nimble. He has employed that skill several times since founding Environment, Safety and Health 11 years ago in Hobe Sound, as a succession of markets dried up and new ones opened.

Clark, 64, is a certified industrial hygienist, is principal and co-owner of Environment, Safety and Health with his wife Ann. He was a co-owner of another consulting firm in Palm Beach County when an "owners' disagreement" cemented his decision to strike out on his own in 1996.

In the early days of the company, Clark built a good business in testing and certifying companies required to meet Occupational Health and Safety Administration requirements. He was primed to become an ergonomics expert under international standards in 2000 when a new administration and a new Congress essentially "shut down OSHA," according to Clark.

Fortunately, Clark shifted gears into another specialty. In 1999, insurance companies were losing Texas court cases in which policyholders were collecting millions of dollars from judgments in mold cases. The companies decided to become proactive in Florida. They hired Clark to assess policyholder water and mold damage, create remediation plans to fix damage, and test air quality after the work was done. Insurance clients became his main source of business, and he began adding to his five-man staff as the workload increased.

Clark says he could have gotten into catastrophe response and greatly expanded his business after the 2004 hurricanes, but wisely decided against it.

"It's a high-volume business and we would have prospered, but it would have been short lived and we would have had a large layoff like other companies," Clark said.

Then, insurance companies began putting limits on mold coverage and pulling out of the state. Clark estimates his business is down 40 percent from 2005 levels.

Time to tap a new market.

"It's our good fortune that we can anticipate the changes and use our fundamental talents to shift markets," Clark said. "Our work continues to be centered on indoor environments that affect people. It's the same knowledge base of science, engineering, biology, and building."

For the past year, Clark has been positioning Environment, Safety and Health as a green builder. He claims to be the first in this area to provide inspection, testing, and consultative services for the full spectrum of green building certifications aimed at making homes more energy and water efficient, resistant to natural disasters, and with healthy indoor air.

Clark's company provides certification for Energy Star, the Environmental Protection Agency program to ensure energy efficiency through features such as sealing window and wall holes and cracks, effective insulation, efficient heating and cooling equipment and high-performance windows.

He also certifies for the "Fortified for safer living" program created by the Institute of Business and Home Safety and supported by the property insurance industry.

This standard focuses on structural fortification for protection against wind, flood and wildfire.

Clark offers certification for the Florida Water Star program to save homeowners money through water efficient plumbing, drought-resistant landscaping and stingy irrigation systems.

Finally, Clark has come up with his own certification, Crystal Quality Built, which includes all the other certifications plus his specialty, emphasis on safe and healthy indoor air. Clark identifies and eliminates problems such as volatile organic

compounds in paint solvents and formaldehyde that affect people's health, especially those with breathing problems.

Most of the green-building certifications are for new construction. Buildings are tested before and during construction to ensure compliance. In his marketing, Clark targets homeowners who have filed building permits, especially those building upper-end homes.

With the current building slump, builders are looking for ways to set their products apart from those of competitors. They are seeking ways to add at least some green certifications that Clark can provide through looking at original plans and running tests on existing houses.

Another potential market, according to Clark, includes families who want to fix up older houses. Many are choosing extensive renovation, and Clark can provide green certification as the home is gutted and rebuilt.

The cost of building green is just 1 percent to 5 percent over conventional building and is generally paid off in the first five years through energy cost savings, Clark said.

"Baby boomers are driving the market," Clark said. "They appreciate the energy features and they're concerned about the environment. Many have money and they are knowledgeable about topics like air quality. They worry that their grandkids will be safe when they visit."

After years as an employee working in the chemical and hazardous waste industries, Clark is happy to have his own business, despite the ups and downs of the real estate industry. And, he's pleased that his employees have stuck with him.

"We have a niche," Clark said. "We work as peers, we have mutual respect, it's a pleasant place to work. We're all senior level. Our clients don't get junior people."

He could see an expansion some day to a dozen employees if the building market turns around, but he predicts a slow 2008.

"I'm optimistic that the green building market will happen eventually," Clark said. "We'll be fine. We'll be prepared to respond to change."

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From bubble gum to landscaping

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Scott Fay is a serial entrepreneur.

The 43-year-old president of Treasure Coast Irrigation and Landscape in Hobe Sound started out selling penny bubble gum to his fourth grade classmates in upstate New York. He still hands out bubble gum from a big jar in his office.

When he was 12, Fay started a grass-cutting and landscape business, which he sold at 18 to move to Hobe Sound.

The son of a pastor, Fay attended Hobe Sound Bible College, starting a landscaping business to put himself through school. He hired other college students, a staff that had grown to 24 when he sold that business in 1988.

After several years back in New York, Fay returned to Florida and, with a wife and growing young family, he became an employee for the first time, joining Rood Landscape in Jupiter.

"Roy Rood was old school and believed in starting employees at the bottom. So, I began by picking weeds," Fay said.

He worked his way up to sales manager and then head of maintenance before the entrepreneurial bug bit again in January 1996.

A personal friend who owned Treasure Coast Irrigation had moved away and was trying to operate the company as an absentee owner, without success. The company was failing and headed for receivership when the friend told Fay he could have it for nothing more than assumption of the debts.

That was just the beginning. Over the past dozen years, Fay has acquired 12 other small irrigation companies, rolling them into the Treasure Coast Irrigation brand. All were distressed and in need of better cash management. All were licensed in their respective counties, so that the Treasure Coast Irrigation empire now stretches from Miami to Jacksonville, west to Naples, and into the Orlando area. Last year, the company jumped the water to take on four jobs in the Caribbean.

Fay's latest acquisition, in the summer of 2007, was a different kind of deal and brings his entrepreneurial story full circle. He acquired his former employer, Rood Landscape. Unlike his other purchases, Fay plans to operate Rood under its original name.

When he took control of Treasure Coast Irrigation, Fay had just three employees, one truck, a small Stuart office and \$250,000 in gross revenues. Today, he has 100 employees at the irrigation company and another 50 at Rood Landscape's location on Beeline Highway in Jupiter. The irrigation company operates out of an expansive facility on Bridge Road that is the former home of a

roofing company. In 2008, Fay estimates the company will earn approximately \$12 million in gross revenues.

Irrigation Business Technology Magazine named Treasure Coast Irrigation one of the top five companies in the state and one of the top 50 in the country based on revenues, reputation, and quality.

About half the company's work is in construction, mostly large commercial development. The other half is maintenance and service for customers living in everything from small mobile homes to Jupiter Island estates. The largest account is the Abocoa development in Jupiter where Treasure Coast Irrigation waters all the common areas and most of the homeowner associations' properties.

Fay says his company offers cradle-to-grave services. Certified designers draw up the plans, installers to implement the plans, 24 technicians for repair and maintenance and workers who replace deteriorated galvanized systems.

Water conservation is obviously a big issue for Treasure Coast Irrigation. With the new one day-a-week, four-hour-a-day watering restrictions just put in place by South Florida Water Management, new irrigation methods are becoming more important.

One of these is drip irrigation, a system of pipes under the mulch and sod to take water directly to the roots. South Florida Water Management allows unlimited drip irrigation. The new regulations apply only to above-ground systems that too often waste water on driveways and walkways and result in heavy evaporation loss.

According to Fay, a drip system can soak roots in eight minutes, compared to twice that for above ground systems, which make up 99 percent of all irrigation systems in this area.

One drawback: drip systems are four times more expensive to install because of the increased labor required. Some homeowners are compromising with a drip system that waters the shrubs and ornamentals and an above-ground system for the lawn.

"We are preaching the gospel of the new systems, not only for business but for the environment," Fay said.

Rood differs from the other irrigation businesses in that half of Rood's business is in new planting and half in maintenance, spraying, pruning and fertilizing. Rood serves mostly high-end estates, which puts them in a different market than most of the landscape companies who partner with Treasure Coast Irrigation in serving municipalities and large developers.

One of Fay's first acts when he acquired the landscape company was to bring back the 89-year-old founder, Roy Rood. He had left the company six years earlier when he sold to his employees.

With 61-year history, Rood Landscaping in the Hobe Sound-Jupiter area. Roy Rood is so well known that when he rode in the

company wagon at last month's Hobe Sound Christmas parade, he was mobbed by old friends and acquaintances.

"Our mission statement for Rood is 'Doing business the old fashioned way'", Fay said. "We are trying to connect to our roots."

To run two companies, Fay delegates to his partners, chief operating officer Tom Balling and chief financial officer Rick Huff. As president, Fay handles sales and business development.

They are the only three Treasure Coast Irrigation employees also working at Rood Landscape, which maintains a separate staff.

"As leaders, we cast the vision," Fay said. "We are going to work to grow the business one relationship at a time."

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A dream that became a reality in baked goods

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

A lifelong dream of starting his own business has come to fruition for former migrant farm worker and mechanic, Salvador Magana. Magana, 59, and his family have made their way from the fields of California to ownership of Dos Milpas, a Latin American bakery, restaurant and convenience store in Fellsmere.

The Indian River Chamber of Commerce named Dos Milpas as Latin Business of the Year, recognizing the Magana family for its contributions to the Fellsmere community. The business donates food to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church's food bank, runs a soccer league for more than 200 children and regularly donates food and money to other Fellsmere organizations and events.

Seeking a better life, Salvador Magana moved his wife and two babies to the United States in 1970, all with permanent-worker status. They were a true migrant family, based in Oxnard, Calif., for more than 17 years but traveling in California and Oregon to pick crops. Two more children arrived and all four worked in the fields while attending school and graduating from high school.

"Dad taught us how to work," said Maria Perez, the only daughter.

Magana, who finished the sixth grade in Mexico, also attended a trade school and became a mechanic for Toyota.

In 1987, seeking a lower cost of living, the Magana family followed relatives to Fellsmere. Magana worked for Fellsmere Farms, now Sun-Ag, as a foreman for 10 years.

Bitten by the entrepreneurial bug, he also arranged delivery of tortillas from a Hanes City factory and began selling them door to door. When his cousin, Herlindo, opened a bakery in Fellsmere in 1997, Salvador agreed to work for him. By 2000, he was ready to strike out on his own and founded Dos Milpas.

Magana's eldest son, Francisco, had his own landscaping business, but joined his father as a partner in the new business along with another son, Salvador, Jr., a Wellington resident.

The younger Salvador Magana is a Motorola engineer who uses his master's degree in business from the University of Florida to oversee the finances for his family's business. Maria worked at several other jobs and brought her bookkeeping experience back to the family business in 2005.

The senior Magana had seen the tortilla production process in Mexico, and imported two tortilla-making machines from his homeland. He became one of the first tortilla manufacturers in Florida.

He and Francisco cold-called Mexican restaurants and convenience stores all over Florida to gain customers. Their success grew thanks to their products' obvious freshness.

"We make ours daily, so they're fresh, unlike the big companies," Maria said.

The major tortilla companies take advantage of economies of scale to undercut small independents like Magana on price. The big firms buy flour in bulk at lower prices and crank out hundreds of thousands of tortillas each day from large machines.

Along with two employees who are not related, family members produce on average 35,000 tortillas a day, four days a week. They mix corn meal, water and lime and insert the tortilla mixture into the machine that rolls out the final products. Maria and her mother stack, pack and box the tortillas for delivery.

Dos Milpas' bakery chef also turns out an assortment of Mexican baked goods, including telera (sandwich buns), conchas (shells) and bollillos (sub rolls), as well as a bevy of pastries.

Francisco personally delivers Dos Milpas baked goods west to Tampa, north to Gainesville, south to West Palm Beach and around the Treasure Coast.

Although Dos Milpas bakery got off to a strong start, business slowed down after Sept. 11, 2001, according to Francisco. In contrast to the current debate over illegal immigrants coming to this country in large quantities, Francisco says the truth was many Hispanic customers began returning to Latin America after 9-11 in

the wake of increased illegal immigration enforcement and forced deportations.

Mexican restaurant and store owners began going out of business and, beset with a steep increase in flour prices, the tortilla business slipped more than 40 percent over the past few years.

To stay in business, the Maganas went in a new direction. In 2006, they opened Dos Milpas restaurant and convenience store in a space opened up when they cut back to one from two tortilla-making machines in the bakery.

The restaurant has done well, opening at 5 a.m. for breakfast and serving lunch until 2 p.m. Many of the patrons are field hands, so the Maganas expect business will be brisk from now until June when the pickers move north.

Francisco and Maria say their dad is a great cook. He manages the two cooks and orders all the products for the restaurant and store, in addition to handling all the bakery orders through his many customer contacts built up over the past seven years.

Francisco estimates that bakery revenues now make up just 60 percent of the total, with 25 percent of sales coming from the restaurant and 15 percent from the store.

Like many entrepreneurs, Salvadore, Sr. and Francisco Magana put in long hours. They open the restaurant at 5 a.m. and are usually at the store until 9 p.m., six days a week each.

"I love to work," Salvador said.

Francisco says the business is doing OK, but the business not making what they should. Still, he has great faith in his father, who is not so sure about the future.

"The economy is down, construction jobs are down. Many Latin American people took their savings and went home to their countries," Salvador said. "We're just going day by day. We don't know what's coming in the next two or three years."

Francisco vows the family won't quit.

"I'm almost 40, but I still listen to my dad," Francisco said. "We'll work it out together. We never lose faith."

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TREASURE COAST
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From New York to Florida, we all need our stone

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

A business that started 47 years ago in Rockland County north of New York is now a key player in the business life of Fellsmere.

Francesco Fornabaio founded his stone installation business in 1960. By 1976, his then eight-year-old son, Nick, was already working with his dad.

Today, Nick, 39, owns the business, Antiquo Stone, which has expanded into stone manufacturing and installation. His 72-year-old father works for Nick as the company's primary installer foreman.

Antiquo makes a wide variety of stone architectural elements for residential and commercial construction companies. Included are floor pavers, fireplaces, window surrounds, fountains and decorative items, more than 500 different components in all. The products are designed for higher-end homes, but also fit the mid-price-ranged residences as well.

While the firm supplies a large number of stock items, it also produces custom pieces at the direction of architects and contractors. Once an order is placed, molds are made and the product is cast from aggregate and silica sand mixed in an automated batch plant machine. The product is then removed from the mold and cured for up to 30 days before delivery to the job site.

Nick's employees learned the process either from Fornabaio or from veteran employees that he trained. All Antiquo installation crews are in-house employees, and are often on the road in Florida for anywhere from three days to three months, depending on the size of the project.

The company serves both the wholesale and retail markets and welcomes distributors, as well. Fornabaio estimates that retail makes up 15 percent of his company's revenues with 85 percent in the commercial-residential market.

The Fornabaio family, including Nick's mother and father and his wife, Michele, moved to Florida in 1997 to escape the New York cold. They followed Nick's in-laws to the Sunshine State.

The family fell in love with Sebastian as a place to live, but chose Fellsmere for the stone business because the capacity for future expansion was better.

In New York, the Fornabaios learned the stone manufacturing process through their affiliation with several shops that supplied the products for them to install. Nick started in Florida with just one employee, who joined him in making molds, casting products and answering the phone. He quickly added another worker to handle the ever-increasing phone answering duties. The entire operation was housed in a 2,000-square-foot building on a half-acre.

As the business grew, much of the manufacturing moved outdoors to spots under canopies, temporary structures and the blue skies. In 2004, Antiquo opened a manufacturing facility, a 16,000-square-

foot building not far from a 5,000-square-foot office structure. The main building can be doubled in size when the time is right. Antiquo's buildings now sit on 5.5 acres.

Fornabaio says the company has been profitable since the first day. The first customers came from advertising, and then positive word of mouth took hold.

"It took seven years to be known as a major player in this area," Fornabaio said.

The company grew to what Fornabaio describes as a comfortable level in 2005 with revenues peaking in 2005-2006.

Like virtually every business linked to the residential construction industry, Antiquo Stone has ridden a financial roller coaster. The company had 35 employees just last year, but that number has now dropped to 14.

"In addition to employee downsizing, we cut operating costs in areas like advertising, telephones and supplies, and we closed our Vero Beach retail showroom," Nick said. "We are keeping equipment that is paid for and holding off on new capital investments. We have less volume now, but the same profitability."

He feels a recovery is still several years away, but he's optimistic. Antiquo Stone has the Treasure Coast mostly to itself, with the nearest competitors in West Palm Beach and Orlando.

With no business background, Nick says he learned management by trial and error. Today, he handles estimating, cost control, advertising and other back-office duties. A dedicated family man, he no longer puts in the round-the-clock hours required in the company's early days, but instead aims for a three- or four-day workweek.

In addition to casters, installers, bookkeepers and secretaries, Nick has had the help of operations manager-estimator and general top assistant James McArdle for the past five years. McArdle toured the business and fell in love with it even though he knew nothing about stone. He's learned and now runs many of the day-to-day operations.

"I liked the atmosphere and the philosophy of putting money back into the business," McArdle said. "It's a joy to come to work here."

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Hyperion a worldwide endeavour

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

In the rear of a Rio industrial park lies a company whose operations stretch to Indonesia, and whose clients are among the rich.

Hyperion Imports has grown from a small wholesaler selling gift items from Indonesia into a manufacturer and supplier of custom doors, flooring and molding and a design consultant called upon by architects and builders around the world.

Jensen Beach couple Michael and Lisa Bell founded Hyperion in 1994. Michael was selling real estate and Lisa was a flight attendant. Married just two years, the couple visited Southeast Asia, where they fell in love with the people, culture and surf of Indonesia.

A native Hawaiian, Mike was well acquainted with the import business and Indonesian works of art.

"The craftsmanship there is phenomenal, and they have a wealth of raw materials." Mike said.

The couple began merchandising Indonesian crafts from their garage to Stuart retailers. Mike continued selling real estate and Lisa flew with Delta Air Lines.

"When we started, \$200 was a big sale," Mike recalled.

Within a year, the business was profitable enough to support him full time. They expanded sales to West Palm Beach, Miami, and Orlando, and the business outgrew the garage. The company moved into rented storage space and then, in 1997, to the present location. Even that has been expanded, from one 1,500-square-foot space to three covering 5,000 square feet.

Also in 1997, Hyperion jumped into handcrafted building materials, starting with custom doors made at an Indonesian factory. The company added other architectural products in 2001, custom flooring and molding in 2003, and flooring made from palm wood in 2004.

As Hyperion grew, the Bells invested in the factory that supplied them. Eventually, the couple became the owners.

Today, the company has 60 employees in one factory and 11 in another working in three shifts. Among the workers are 11 artists.

Mike points out that the wood, doors and flooring all must be precisely cut and trimmed. He credits his Indonesian workers' great skills.

"Designers know that our niche is custom design, which many companies don't offer," Lisa said. "Our materials are unique and our products are 'out of the box.'"

Hyperion's factories make countertops out of coconut shells and cinnamon, and flooring out of palm wood. Customers want exotic products, such as hand-carved wood and green stones found only in Indonesia. Mike said such work would be expensive to produce in the United States. Even with shipping costs, the Indonesian products are cheaper.

The Bells have learned on the job. When their first shipments of wood from Indonesia arrived with cracks, for example, they quickly learned to

pick just the right kind of wood and to kiln dry it to eliminate moisture. They also invested in sophisticated equipment.

Mike and Lisa also take pride in their environmental consciousness.

"We buy only legal logs that are 'certified' in areas where the government enforces certain criteria on the size and the age and how many you can take from any one place," Lisa said. "We use a lot of palm wood for our projects because palm trees are plentiful in Indonesia and only take 15 years to grow."

In recent years, Hyperion has become more than a supplier to builders. Mike provides design consultation and project management for tropical home designers in far-flung areas as Australia, Bali, the Bahamas and Belize.

The Bells credit well-known, Bali-based architect and designer Made Wijaya with opening these opportunities by inviting Mike to participate in his projects.

Hyperion has also done well on the Treasure Coast. Hyperion was averaging at least three local clients each month, but with his real estate background, Mike foresaw the current real estate slump. While their U.S. business has dropped off dramatically, their foreign business has tripled. It is only within the last month that business has started to pick up locally with the return of snowbirds.

Mike and Lisa have just finished a major local project, the new home of Rufus and Melynda Wakeman on the St. Lucie River not far from Hyperion's headquarters. The company supplied 10,000 square feet of flooring, 40 doors, stairs with hand-carved railings, and custom inlaid counter tops with cinnamon bark.

Mike said the referrals from that project have been very positive. Much of Hyperion's work comes from word-of-mouth recommendations through designers, architects and builders. Hyperion projects have also been featured in six home and architectural magazines.

While the business is 13 years old, Mike and Lisa have known each other for 40 years. Their parents were best friends and next-door neighbors in Hawaii. Mike, 53, and his sister babysat Lisa, now 43, when she was a pre-schooler.

After Mike's mother moved to Jensen Beach in 1991, Lisa accompanied her mother on a visit and renewed acquaintances with Mike. Now, 15 years later, they are the proud parents of two daughters, ages 12 and 10, and are planning a move halfway around the world to Bali, where they are building a house. Mike and both girls speak Indonesian.

Mike emphasizes that he and Lisa will remain connected to their Rio operations through a manager, a sales representative and regular visits. Mike says he has spent too many hours in management, especially on travel, and looks forward to handing off those duties.

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November 16, 2007

Ecological Associates keeps tabs on our turtles

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Bob and Erik are best known as the turtle guys.

Yes, monitoring and protecting the endangered sea turtles are still a big part of their business, Ecological Associates, but Bob Ernest and Erik Martin provide 20 services.

Ecological Associates is best known as an environmental consulting firm with long experience in working on marine, estuary, coastal projects. Add land to the list.

Ernest, 61, and Martin, 58, are marine biologists with more than 30 years of professional experience. They once worked for Applied Biology, another consulting firm in the same building they occupy today, a block off Jensen Beach Boulevard.

Ernest was the local manager when Applied Biology decided to pull out of Florida. He and Martin saw a need for their services, realized they had good contacts and potential clients, and decided to start their own company with just one employee, another biologist.

Since their primary work with Applied Biology had been with sea turtles, they sought and won a multi-year project from the Florida Department of Environmental Resources and Martin County to study the effect of beach re-nourishment on the turtles. This contract began their long and ongoing relationship with Martin County.

Today, Ecological Associates marks and monitors turtle nests on South Hutchinson Island from Normandy Beach in St. Lucie County to the Martin County tip of the island.

They also do turtle work for many counties, including Indian River, Volusia, Palm Beach, St. Johns and Walton.

Much of Martin's work centers on beachfront lighting management to prevent spillover of light from condominium buildings and their parking lots to the beach. When baby turtles hatch and scramble from their nests, they follow the light of the ocean horizon to the sea. Land light can confuse them and lead them in the wrong direction.

"Every hour baby turtles wander around without finding the ocean greatly reduces their chance of survival," Ernest said.

Counties have applied for federal grants to evaluate lighting problems, devise ordinances against light on the beach, and provide resources, like correct lighting fixtures, to fix the problem. Martin has light management projects underway in Sea Island, Georgia and John's Island in Indian River County.

"We were involved in some of the earliest lighting evaluations to determine if lights were having a bad effect on turtle hatchlings, Martin said. "We learned we could modify lights to provide for safety of people while not harming turtles."

While counties can crack down on violators through ordinances, Martin says most beach dwellers have been very cooperative. Often, they didn't know of the problem and will pay for necessary changes to protect the baby turtles.

Intentionally harming sea turtles is a federal crime. To allow some long-standing practices to continue while also protecting the turtles, however, the federal government can give permits to allow minimal unintentional harm to the endangered species.

Daytona Beach has such a permit, for example, to allow continued driving on its beach, a major draw for tourists, and uses Ecological Associates to devise plans that minimize harm to the turtles. The company is doing a similar project in Walton County.

"We really enjoy sea turtles," Ernst said. "While loggerheads are starting to decline in number, greens and leatherbacks are increasing. It's rewarding to help save an endangered animal."

Turtle work is seasonal, mainly from March to October. As the firm has grown, it has filled the rest of the year with other work.

Ernest and Martin have always targeted the public sector. They provide water quality studies needed by municipalities for their state and federal permits. They're now doing more land-based work, such as identifying and marking vegetation which might be affected by an expansion or construction project, or marking the boundaries of wetlands.

"We provide a full array of services to advise municipalities on managing the environment," Ernest said. "We try to do things to improve projects, to improve the value of projects."

Ernest knows that current property tax debates and local budget woes may impact future projects, especially discretionary work. His firm's monitoring work will continue, however, because much of it is required by permits.

Ecological Associates has also done work for Florida Power & Light and other utilities. The firm measures and monitors warm water discharges from power plants.

The environmental company saw a big spurt in business about one-and-one-half years ago when new federal regulations set numeric standards for the amount of aquatic life, including fish and plankton, that power plants could draw in with their cooling water.

As a result, power companies needed new data. Ecological Associates stepped in with quantification and monitoring. This work involves looking at plankton through microscopes allowed the firm to establish its current lab, where hundreds of samples are processed and organisms are sorted and identified, a field known as taxonomy.

"The lab grew out of our power plant work and allowed us to expand our offerings and offer new core-market services," Ernst said. "We now work as a subcontractor analyzing samples for other environmental companies. Not a lot of companies do taxonomy, so there's a huge potential for business."

Taxonomy now makes up about half of EAI's revenues, work with turtles about 40 percent and the other 10 percent comes from assorted consulting, including water quality studies to contain and treat water going into the Indian River estuary.

Ecological Associates was profitable from the start, according to Ernest. After many years with annual revenues around \$500,000, the figure shot up to \$1.5 million last year thanks to the power plant work. Unfortunately, a federal court has remanded the new, tougher regulations and utilities are re-evaluating their programs. Ernest expects revenues to decline next year, but sees lots of potential business on the horizon.

EAI now has 10 full-time employees, nine of whom are biologists, and an equal number of part-time workers.

Although Ernest spends about 60 percent of his time on administrative tasks, he participates in larger projects and manages all projects. For example, he is lead scientist directing the preparation of Walton County's Habitat Conservation Plan for sea turtles and beach mice.

As scientific director, Martin spends the majority of his time managing turtle-related projects and provides technical oversight of most aspects of EAI's laboratory operations.

October 19, 2007

Vero Beach may be new haven for Internet moguls

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Vero Beach is not a mecca for Internet moguls, but two software engineers with roots in a high-tech hotbed, Nashua, N.H., have made the city home for their fast-growing software company.

Doug Fowler, 46, and Ron Chesley, 45, founded SpectorSoft in 1998 to produce Internet monitoring software for use by parents and corporations.

Fowler came up with the concept after realizing that existing Internet filtering software to block children's access to Web sites was not keeping up with the rapid multiplication of sites.

His idea: Instead of blocking sites, teach children what is good and what is bad on the Internet and then back that up with software to record the screen so that it can be played back. The concept grew out of a remote control software product Fowler and Chesley had devised for a former company they ran in New England.

Fowler and Chesley had met at the University of New Hampshire where both majored in computer science in the early 1980s. They worked for a New Hampshire tech company writing software, then headed a spin-off, developing the remote control software allowing one computer to control another. That product enabled computer fixes to be done from another location by help desks.

Their former boss moved to Vero Beach and lured his executives south, Chesley to Vero in 1990 and Fowler to North Carolina, where they all worked on a new venture, Ocean Isle Software. They built the business to 70 employees before selling to a California company.

Chesley says they dabbled in things separately for a few years before again joining forces in 1998 to create SpectorSoft.

Spector, their first product, hit the market in 1999 and was successful immediately with sales mainly on eBay. Fowler, Chesley and office manager Cheryl Warriner, who had worked with them in New Hampshire, were the only employees.

By 2000, sales were approaching the \$1 million mark. Last year, they climbed to \$13 million, and the partners expect \$15.5 million this year.

Fowler says he was simply looking for something to produce a decent income and maybe employ five to 10 people. Today, SpectorSoft employs 75 at its Indian River Drive headquarters.

Fowler and Chesley see that number growing within the next few years, possibly to several hundred workers.

"The company has gone a lot further than I thought when I came up with the idea," Fowler said. "The idea of having something to help parents and employers was something that really hit home. It was the first of its type, allowing (computer) screen record and play back."

Spector remains the basic product for parents, tracking the computer screen and keystrokes. Spector-Pro, a more sophisticated version, tracks Web sites, e-mail, and time spent on the computer. Another product, eBlaster, feeds regular e-mail reports to parents about home computer use.

These products sell for \$100 and can be bought at retail chains like Office Depot and Comp USA in addition to the Internet.

SpectorSoft is working with a national government-funded group looking into Internet drug buys by teenagers. The organization provides lists of over-the-counter medicines that can be purchased over the Internet to SpectorSoft, which develops software to look for transactions involving young people.

Two other products are mainly for employers. Corporate Network Edition monitors employees who are suspected of violating corporate policies on computer use.

Spector 360 offers a higher-level view of employees and aggregates results to point out possible widespread problems.

The corporate products range in price from \$695 up to thousands of dollars depending on how many users are monitored.

Chesley said that 90 percent of the company's sales are still made online. SpectorSoft technicians have become skilled at search engine optimization techniques, which keep the company high on the Google and Yahoo lists most consumers use to find products.

SpectorSoft has twice made Inc. Magazines list of the 500 Fastest Growing Companies, and has captured two Editors Choice awards from PC Magazine.

Chesley said the company's 25-person tech group is constantly improving the product.

"The layman thinks we just develop the software and stop," Chesley laughs. "In truth, operating systems and software are changing constantly, and we have to keep up."

Chesley is also very proud of the company's 25-person customer service team. It takes calls from around the world, around the clock.

"Most of our good ideas come from our customers," Chesley said.

"We get lots of ideas and lots of accolades."

High service levels don't mean high stress levels. The company has flexible work schedules. Some employees punch in at 7 a.m., others at noon. Some employees work from outside the office.

"If you allow people to work at times good for them, they will be happy," Fowler said.

The partners are flex workers themselves. Fowler, who handles sales and marketing, is a night owl who prefers to come in about 2 p.m.

and work far into the night. Chesley, who heads product development, is a family man with a wife and two small children, and opts for a day shift.

Fowler and Chesley say they can recruit and retain workers by offering higher pay, December bonuses and a regular schedule of outings, picnics and parties.

"We like this business," Chesley said. "We like our employees."

The partners like Vero Beach, too, but its a challenge to find developers who want to work in Vero Beach, rather than a high-tech centers such as Silicon Valley, Boston and North Carolina.

"We recruit all over, out of state, looking for established people with families who would like the Vero lifestyle," Chesley said.

SpectorSoft is currently ramping up sales and marketing, with a 20-person in-house staff and schedule of trade shows.

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October 19, 2007

Summit Construction moves close to Vero Beach Airport

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Eight years ago, Summit Construction Management began life with partners Brad Schuh and Chris Vasquez working out of Schuh's Vero Beach house.

In just a few months, Schuh, Vasquez and their five Summit Construction employees will move to a new 30,000-square-foot building that Summit is buying near the Vero Beach Airport in partnership with another firm.

It's a mark of just how far the company has come. Summit has grown steadily in a strong niche market, the cities and schools of

Indian River and St. Lucie counties. Annual revenues are up to \$10-12 million.

With 80 to 90 percent of their present business in municipal and school construction, does Summit fear a slowdown because of government cutbacks and shrinking school budgets?

"It's a worrisome thing," Schuh said. "I still think there's enough work."

The partners are optimistic because of ongoing contracts. Summit will spend the next year renovating and expanding the Vero Beach Airport terminal building. The firm just won the \$3.1 million project to build a new music wing at Sebastian River Middle School.

"We have confidence in our county," Vasquez said.

Summit has several competitive strengths. It is a bonded company, a requirement for doing municipal work that few other firms in the region possess.

Another strength is the firm's versatility.

"We're a small company, but we can do projects ranging from very small to multi-million dollars," Schuh said.

Vasquez said they generally bid on jobs in the \$500,000 to \$5 million range.

Recent projects include the clubhouse at Pointe West, which won an Indian River Chamber of Commerce award for architectural beauty, the four-building Gifford Alternative Education Campus and Pocahontos Park in Vero Beach.

Keeping in-house staff to a small number, Summit operates as a general contractor hiring only local subcontractors. Most of those firms have worked with Summit many times.

"Relationships are the backbone of our business," Schuh said. "We found our team is best made up of small contractors. They give us favored treatment by meeting our work schedules and helping us on price because we treat them fairly and pay them quickly."

Summit's subcontractors work only on commercial or government projects.

"It's a different kind of business from residential," Schuh added. "It's a different mentality, a different pace."

With the slowdown in the home building industry, Schuh and Vasquez see more residential contractors trying to crack the commercial market. The competition is heating up, especially from contractors that started in the hurricane clean-up years of 2004 and 2005.

Most of Summit's clients come back. As a result, the company does lots of negotiated work in addition to answering requests for competitive bids.

Summit's clients include Indian River Community College, the Indian River School District, Indian River County Public Works,

the City of Vero Beach, St. Lucie County and the City of Fort Pierce.

Schuh laughs that Summit has worked on every school campus in Indian River, everything from fixing a door or window to building a campus.

"We know how to work within the school's schedules, work around students and back off during the FCAT testing periods," Schuh said.

Like any school contractor, Summit complies with rules that require its employees and subcontractor employees to go through criminal background checks under the Jessica Lunsford act designed to find potential sexual predators.

Schuh, 44, and Vasquez, 48, have always worked in commercial construction. They met while working for another Vero Beach contractor, a relationship that dates back 16 years.

Schuh serves as president and project manager, the desk job, while Vasquez prefers being outside as vice president and operations manager. It was always that way.

The two equal partners have similar backgrounds. Schuh is a Vero Beach High School graduate and earned a degree in building construction from the University of Florida. Vasquez is a Miami native and a business school graduate of Eastern Kentucky University.

Both worked construction in high school and college and both fled the traffic and congestion of South Florida. Schuh began his career in West Palm Beach, hated it, and couldn't wait to come home to Vero Beach. Schuh and Vasquez believe in giving back to the community. Summit was named a Company of the Year by the Indian River Chamber of Commerce in part because of its donations of time and money to many local organizations.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

October 19, 2007

S.R. 60 safety is concern with remake

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Downtown Vero Beach merchants are signing on reluctantly to a compromise plan to increase safety during the state Department of Transportation's remake of State Route 60.

In a decision last week, the DOT refused a request by the merchants to add more designated left-turn lanes and landscaped "bulb outs" to the westbound lanes of the Twin Pairs. The merchants want the additions as a way to slow traffic and make the downtown a destination rather than just an area to drive through.

As plans stand now, just one bulb out will be built in the southern most lane of westbound S.R. 60, near the intersection of 14th Avenue.

Vero Beach Public Works Director Monte Falls proposes an alternative: adding striping to the left lane from 14th through 16th avenues, where downtown stores are close to the highway. This would emphasize that it is a turn lane and close it to through-traffic speeders.

"It's a small step, but at least it's something," said Downtown Merchants Association President Randy Hagood, who, with his wife, owns the Tea and Chi tea store about a half-block from S.R. 60. "I was disappointed, but not surprised, by the DOT rejection."

Hagood had gathered signatures from downtown merchants on a petition he presented last week to Falls and to City Manager James M. Gabbard.

"The road affects all of us, it divides us," Hagood said. "We want to make the road more beautiful and pedestrian friendly."

Hagood said the effort points out the need for a full-time manager for Main Street Vero Beach, the larger organization for all those, not just merchants, connected with Vero Beach business. The recruitment effort is under way, according to Hagood, but such a person could have devoted much more time to improving the S.R. 60 project than the volunteers who had to carry the load in their spare time.

The remaking of S.R. 60 in downtown Vero Beach is to start this week with preparatory work, like curb and sidewalk repair, handicap ramps and shaft drilling for new traffic light poles, according to Jim Frye, project administrator for the DOT.

S.R. 60 will be repaved from 21st Street on the west to Mockingbird Drive on the east. Completion is expected by January 2009.

September 21, 2007

Success of La Borgata is no surprise

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

If you check out the track record of Dominic and Rosalia DiFede, it should come as no surprise that their Italian restaurant and pizzeria, La Borgata in Palm City, has lines out the door, even in the normally slow summer season.

It's that way when the DiFedes take over a new location, usually somewhat rundown, and turn it around.

La Borgata is approaching its second anniversary in November. Business was good almost from the beginning. Revenues doubled this past winter season over the first season, and the second summer just ending has been up 30 percent from the first, according to Rosalie.

That's not a surprise to a couple who seven years ago sold their restaurant "Bellini's" in Woodbridge, N.J., to "semi-retire" to Florida. They never joined the ranks of the idle.

The DiFedes owned and ran Bellini's from 1993 to 2000. It was the fulfillment of a dream for Rosalia, whose goal was always a 12-table restaurant and pizzeria. It grew far beyond that. Within four months, they had a crew of four. They then knocked out a wall, took over the former Chinese restaurant next door, added tables and booths, and still had customers waiting.

The first week that Bellini's was open, it grossed \$3,000, the DeFedes said. When they sold it, the restaurant was grossing \$1.2 million, seated 114 and employed 22 people.

The couple had a 147-seat restaurant in Freehold, N.J., which they also sold in 2000.

Dominic, 47, and Rosalia, 44, have been married for 27 years. Both are natives of Palermo, Sicily, where Dominic's parents rented from Rosalia's parents and lived upstairs.

Rosalia's parents came to New York in 1972 and her dad bought a Brooklyn pizzeria. They continued to visit Palermo on vacations. Through those visits, Dominic and Rosalia became better acquainted, began writing daily letters across the oceans and became engaged in 1979. Dominic moved to America that year and he and Rosalia went to work for her Dad, learning the pizza business.

In 1986, they borrowed money to buy their first pizzeria and trattoria in Neptune, N.J., and then another in nearby Edison. Both were built with hard work.

"For seven years, we worked seven days a week from 10 a.m. to midnight," Dominic recalled.

In 1993, Bellini's opened and for the next five years neither one had a day off.

"We believe that what you put in you get out, so we work hard," Rosalie said.

Then, as now, Dominic is the pizza creator.

"I love to make pizza," he said. "It's a sport. I did the kitchen at Bellini's several nights a week and I didn't like it."

Rosalia cracks the whip in the kitchen and the restaurant. She learned to cook from her mother and cook books.

"It's a passion, it's in the blood," Rosalia said. "Even now, I wake up in the middle of the night with ideas for the restaurant."

A mutual friend in Port St. Lucie lured the DiFedes to the Treasure Coast, where they fell in love with Palm City. From 2000 to 2005, Dominic owned pizzerias in Port St. Lucie and Vero Beach. He even spent time in the unfamiliar role of employee. Rosalia worked as a country club server and an administrative assistant.

For several years, they had their eye on the Fireside Grill, a bar and sandwich shop on Mapp Road. When it became available, they snapped it up, spent four months refurbishing and painting, and opened in November 2005 as La Borgata. It means "the neighborhood" in Italian.

Remembering their success in New Jersey, Dominic and Rosalia hired their cook from Bellini's, moving him and his family here. They also took on a partner, Anthony Cortichia, who had learned how to make pizza while working for Dominic at his Vero Beach location. Both men received their kitchen education from Rosalia.

"This dream of mine came to fruition," Rosalie said. "We planned a grand opening but it never came together so we just opened the door."

Aside from a few weeks of radio ads to promote the opening, the couple relied on word of mouth to build traffic.

The DiFedes estimate 60 percent of their revenues comes from the 74-seat restaurant and 40 percent from the pizzeria.

Running LaBorgata is truly a family affair. In addition to Dominic and Rosalia, daughters Francesca, 23, and Rita, 24, handle many management chores. Francesca's interests lean more toward the dining room side while Rita prefers the pizza business.

Both started by helping out at their grandparents' New York pizzeria when they were small. When they grew older, Francesca

studied fashion design and Rita the beauty business. Neither was able to shake the lure of the restaurant business.

"I went to school to get out of this business, but I love it," Francesca said. "I love working with my parents. We've done this for so many years that we want to be together."

Also on board are Francesca's fiancée, Gianluca DiFede (no relation), and cousin, Francesca Sanfratello. Even a younger brother, 11-year-old Matthew, helps out.

They work six days so that a family member is always on duty. Dominic and Rosalia add that the restaurant is blessed with eight very good employees.

They also have loyal patrons, Rosalia said. LaBorgata takes reservations as a service to them.

Some will also become travel buddies. At their urging, Rosalia plans to lead them on a tour of the family homeland in Sicily.

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September 21, 2007

Stryker Electric juiced about industry award

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Palm City-based Stryker Electric is that company you hear about because it is both doing well financially and doing good for the community.

The electrical contractor is the Palm City Chamber of Commerce's representative for an Industry Appreciation Award to be given by the Martin County Business Development Board in mid-October. The company is being recognized for its long history of giving time, finances and expertise to a number of local organizations.

"Giving back to the community you serve is vital," said Scott B. Eccleston, who holds several titles at Stryker including chairman. He is one of five partners in the privately held company. "I say that to anyone getting into business."

The company donates to and Eccleston is personally involved in the American Red Cross, the Humane Society, the Treasure Coast Wildlife Center, Big Brothers Big Sisters and Caring Children, Clothing Children.

Eccleston credits the example set by company president and co-founder Michael G. Bryan.

"Our company has been rewarded because of his generosity to the community," Eccleston said.

The proof is in the financial numbers. Eccleston, 44, who directs the company's finances and administration, said that 2007 will be Stryker's best year ever despite the slowdown in the economy generally and the construction business specifically. The company is still operating on a backlog of multi-year contracts signed in previous years.

When Eccleston joined the company in 1993, Stryker had \$4 million in revenues. From 2005 to 2006, service revenues increased 40 percent.

Today, annual revenues total \$30 million, he said. Most of that comes from installing electrical wiring in buildings, primarily new construction.

More than half of revenues comes from institutional work, including schools, hospitals and correctional facilities. One of its major projects: construction of the new Palm Beach Gardens High School.

Another 35 percent of revenues comes from multi-family building construction, such as Jade Beach and Brickell on the River, high-rise condominiums in Miami-Dade County.

A small but growing portion of the business, which already accounts for the remaining 10 percent of revenues, is the service department. It does work for retailers such as Home Depot, WalMart and BJ's Wholesale Club.

Stryker serves customers from Indian River County to Miami-Dade County. The company once had an office in Charlotte, N.C. It closed, but the firm continues to serve existing clients in the Carolinas and Georgia.

At its current size, Stryker is geared for large projects, Eccleston said.

The company bids on projects worth \$3 million and up. The ideal job is worth between \$3 million and \$14 million.

Projects of that size keeps busy the company's 285 employees, 246 of which are electricians. Another 23 people work in the service department and 16 in administration.

Eccleston also has an apprenticeship program, which pays the total cost of sending any interested employee to Indian River Community College's four-year program leading to journeyman status.

"We want young people to know these are good jobs," Eccleston said. "Electricians can earn up to \$50,000 after about five years."

All employees are full time and their benefits include vacation time, medical, dental, life insurance and a company-matching 401(k) retirement program.

Stryker's has stayed busy in recent years with school construction projects from Martin County to Miami-Dade. With recent a downturn in school enrollment and cutbacks in funding, some school boards taking projects off the board, Eccleston said.

At the same time, capital for condo construction has begun to dry up.

Anticipating a slowdown, Stryker shrank its workforce over the past year or so. The company once had more than 400 workers and cut that to less than 300 through attrition. Company leaders also became more selective in choosing projects.

"We feel we shouldn't have to lay anybody off," Eccleston said. "We will continue to handle personnel levels through attrition if the market continues down."

Stryker has also trimmed back its office space. Eccleston opted to move all but administration personnel to the field.

"We need our guys on the job," Eccleston said. "I set up a compound for them at their sites. They take their vehicles home since they're on call 24 hours a day."

From 15,000 square feet at its old location in the Turnpike Industrial Park in Palm City, the company moved just last March to a new 4,800-square-foot facility in the Palm City Business Park on High Meadows Avenue. The company also maintains a small office in North Miami and three more at major job sites.

Stryker competes on the Treasure Coast primarily with Gerelco Electrical Contractors, a large company, and the smaller Fast Track and Arlington firms.

Brothers Joe and Michael Bryan founded Stryker in 1983 when they purchased the former Charter Electric.

They changed the name to Stryker because they liked the popular fishing boat of the same name. The company was based in Jupiter until 2000, when it moved to Palm City where both Bryan and Eccleston live. They also wanted to make the company more focused on the Treasure Coast.

Joe has retired but Michael, 64, a licensed electrician, remains active not just as president, but also as a field worker.

"He just wants to be out there with the guys, working alongside them," Eccleston said. "He's their leader, their mentor."

Eccleston joined Stryker in 1993 after an earlier career as a bartender and then in country club food and beverage management. Unfortunately, he says, his product got the best of him. A recovering alcoholic, he has been sober since 1990.

"I was lucky that I realized I had a problem at the young age of 26 when I could do something about it," Eccleston said.

He went on to earn his degree in accounting from Florida Atlantic University and worked his way up to his present leadership role at Stryker.

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August 17, 2007

Moore Solutions rides cutting edge of software education

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Terrance and Jayne Moore have ridden the dot-com roller coaster and been wounded by the dot-com bomb, but that's all in the past now. The Port St. Lucie couple has recovered nicely, thank you, and their information technology training company, Moore Solutions, has been racking up 20 percent revenue growth each year since 2004.

The firm is a state licensed private school and a Microsoft-certified partner. Terrance estimates that half of their work comes from corporate clients providing training for employees, many of whom are either in danger of losing a job because of a lack of computer skills or will get an upgrade with new skills and higher pay.

"We do productive training," said Jayne. "We teach hands on, not theory. We know the latest software, the latest trends."

As a Microsoft partner, Moore Solutions gets trial, or "beta," versions of software far in advance of the retail market. Moore instructors can train on that software and be ready for the changeover when it comes. All of this costs money.

"We put lots of resources into research and development," Terrance said. "We take a smaller profit to do this."

Moore Solutions offers day, evening and weekend classes, using a staff of five full time employees and three contractors. Class size is capped at 10, and Moore leaders are careful to place students on the right level.

From day one, they've had a money-back guarantee which promises a free repeat of the course or a refund check to any student dissatisfied with a course. The company has issued only three refunds in 11 years of operation.

Moore Solutions' client list includes the city of Port St. Lucie, St. Lucie County, the City of Stuart, Martin Memorial Hospital, and Riverside Bank.

"Education is a great area," Jayne said. "Students who come to us are happy. They're saving their jobs or they're getting a raise with the training."

Students can take an individual course for just a few days or follow an entire Microsoft program of six months. They earn a Moore Solutions certificate that is valuable where the company is well known, or they can take the tough Microsoft test. A passing grade grants certification useful in finding work around the world.

Moore Solutions is also a major partner of the Workforce Development Board of the Treasure Coast, where it won the 2004 Training Provider of the Year award and the 2006 Community Partner of the Year honor.

The Workforce Development Board is a private non-profit organization whose mission is to provide a productive workforce and match up employers and potential employees.

Providing information technology training for this organization supplies about a quarter of Moore Solution's revenues.

Terrance and Jayne expect the final fourth of their revenues will soon come from a new program of information technology academies in high schools. Moore Solutions will supply a turnkey operation using a Moore instructor. The company will set up the program, recruit students, hold open houses and form an advisory council of school administrators who provide local input.

Terrance and Jayne have been working on it for three years. The program is in line with a Florida Senate bill calling for more partnerships between schools and business. The full program will be four years, including an internship with a business. Students will qualify for jobs following high school graduation or can enter college with advanced placement credits.

All instructors will work full time at the schools. In the summer, they will come back to Moore Solutions' office for education and training, and to get re-certified by Moore's master instructors, who are trained at Microsoft facilities.

Moore's first IT academy is opening as a pilot program this fall at Martin County High School. Freshman, sophomores and juniors will be eligible to enroll

Terrance is hoping to take the program statewide over the next few years. He foresees hiring upwards of 10 new instructors each year for the next five years.

That's another ramp-up for a company that started small, grew quickly and had to scale back during the dot-com bust.

Long Island native Terrance and Jayne from the English Midlands met in 1990 when she visited a friend at the State University of New York campus in Brockport. Terrance was also a student there, majoring in business and communications.

When the cleaning business they worked for in nearby Rochester suddenly folded, Terrance dropped out of school. With Jayne, they started a cleaning business with the out-of-work employees.

Terrance did the sales and marketing while Jayne used her honors degree in humanities from Wolverhampton University in England to land a full-time job with a computer training school. Starting as a hostess, she took classes, became a teacher, and learned the business. They married in 1991.

Seeking the warmth of Florida, the young couple sold the cleaning business and moved to the Treasure Coast in 1995 to buy a bingo hall on U.S. 1 in northern St. Lucie County.

A repairman fixing their computer suggested they get involved with the Internet and thus was born Moore Solutions.

Terrance tried selling Web site design services but struggled to find customers who understood the product at that time. Jayne stepped in with training classes for potential computer buyers. Her first class for 10 real estate agents produced three Web site sales.

From 1996 to 2000, they built the business up to about 40 employees in two divisions, Web sites and training. The Moores were on the verge of taking the company public when the high-tech market cratered.

From 2001 to 2003, the company struggled. Terrance and Jayne slashed expenses, including their own salaries. They cut back staff to the current level. With new software coming on the market, clients could design their own Web sites, so the Moores shut down that part of the business to concentrate on training.

Their tough fiscal restraint and strategic moves paid off. The company is again on the rise. Family and friends who invested in the firm also benefited.

"We're proud to say not one person lost a dime," Terrance said.

With the usual long hours and hard work that comes with running a small business, Terrance and Jayne have found time to raise four children who are now ages 5 to 12. Jayne remembers the hours she has taught computer classes with one or more children in swings at the office.

Jayne said they've had offers to buy the business, but the couple is not interested in retiring. "I really don't know what else I would do."

August 17, 2007

Indian entrepreneurs hit home run

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Cricket is king in India, but a family from that distant land is enjoying great Treasure Coast success by branding its string of Port St. Lucie-based liquor stores with references to America's national pastime.

With names like 1st Base, 2nd Base, 3rd Base, Home Plate, Home Run and Grand Slam, Atul Patel, his wife, Varsha, and older brother, Rajen, have turned hard work into a growing chain.

"I never thought I would open more than two stores," Atul said. "New plazas kept opening and store space became available. "If I hadn't done it, a competitor would have."

Atul Patel, 47, came to Florida in 1982 with his recently-widowed mother from Bombay to join his brother, who was living in Jensen Beach.

Atul had an undergraduate degree in architecture in India, and began work on a master's degree at the University of Florida. He dropped out after surveying the marketplace.

"Architecture did not offer a great future here in Florida where homebuilders do much of the design work themselves," Atul said.

Rajen, meanwhile, made use of his master's degree in business. He started a convenience store in Jensen Beach. Atul joined him as an employee until 1987 when Rajen sold the original store and the brothers opened Mets Discount Beverage in the 300 block of Port St. Lucie Boulevard. When the baseball team of the same name objected, they changed the name to 1st Base.

The "boulevard" was a two-lane road when they opened, and the brothers were alone in the area's beverage business with nothing but trees beyond them. As development continued west, the brothers followed, opening 2nd Base in 1989 in the 1700 block and 3rd Base in 1991 near Gatlin Boulevard.

"As the city grew, we grew," Atul said.

Brother Rajun decided in 2003 to scale back his involvement. Today, he owns and operates just the 2nd Base store. Atul has continued the chain's expansion by opening in newly-built Publix shopping centers.

First came Home Plate in 2003 on NE St. James Drive in the fast-growing area north of Prima Vista in Port St. Lucie.

In 2004, Atul opened Grand Slam in Vero Beach and last year Home Run at Kanner Highway and Salerno Road, Stuart. The stores range from 3,600 to 4,000 square feet.

The multi-location chain gives Atul the ability to buy in bulk, lowering costs that he passes on to customers.

"Most of the time we are the cheapest," Atul said.

So how does an architecture major, who drinks nothing stronger than Diet Coke, learn how to stock a liquor store?

Atul Patel said he learns from his mistakes. He brings in a wide variety of products in smaller quantities to each new store to gauge customer reaction. He then stocks what sells and cuts back on slow-moving items, often moving them to his other locations. Customer tastes vary across the Treasure Coast, he observes.

"Our 3rd Base location is more blue collar, so beer sales are high, while the Stuart store has more scotch drinkers," Atul said. "We are flexible. We don't impose our choices on the customer."

Atul said long hours are a requirement for anyone growing a retail business.

For his first eight years in business, he never had a day off. He still puts in 10-hour days, taking off only Sundays.

"If I minded working, I wouldn't have gotten into this business," Atul said. "It's not hard work, just long hours."

He makes the rounds, spending several hours a day at each store. He employs two workers in each store, but no managers.

"I do everything and so does everyone else," Atul said. "The staff is so good that I hear many more compliments than complaints from customers."

Atul said the business is easier now with many of the same customers returning over the past 15 to 20 years. Some of the customers have moved with the stores to new Treasure Coast locations.

"We have a good name," he said. "It makes it easy for opening more locations."

On average, each location has more than doubled revenues since opening, according to Atul, although their growth has varied. The Vero Beach location took off its very first week, he said, while the St. James Drive location in Port St. Lucie has lagged a bit behind expectations. The new Stuart store has almost caught up to St. James Drive in just over a year of existence.

Atul Patel is not done. He's looking at Palm City and northern Indian River County as possible expansion sites.

Atul and Varsha have been married for 18 years and live in Port St. Lucie with 11-year-old son, Rishubh. Varsha ran 3rd Base for several years before the birth of their son. She's a classical singer with a master's degree in music.

Sadly, the Patel brothers' mother, who moved to America with Atul, passed away last year.

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August 3, 2007

Medical technology

BYLINE: Bill Church BJ contributor

Even Michael Moore would be pleased. Despite the well-documented woes of the American system of health, one problem area is progressing rapidly toward solution, both nationally and here on the Treasure Coast. After drowning in printed documents for years, the paperless medical facility is either already here or on the drawing boards at area hospitals and medical practices. Imagine a world in which all your prescriptions, test results, doctor's notes, even your most recent X-ray or MRI images are stored electronically. If you need medical attention while traveling or at your second home, medical personnel can access your records through the Internet with a password you provide. Or, you could carry your medical records on a compact disc or plug-in device for use on any computer. That world is now reality for many. Here's a look at how the move from paper to electronic systems is taking place at a leading physician practice group and two hospitals.

Heart & Family Health Institute

One of the Treasure Coast leaders is the Heart & Family Health Institute of Port St. Lucie, which has been totally paperless for more than three years. President and CEO Dr. David E. Wertheimer decided in 2002 that his system would be purchased from one company, would be integrated and paperless.

An integrated system merges the practice management (PM) function with the electronic medical record (EMR) function. Practice management handles all the business functions, including billing, collections and appointments. Electronic medical records systems track all patient records, eliminating those rows upon rows of manila folders stacked to the ceiling in most medical offices.

"When the PM and EMR systems are integrated, it's a powerful tool," Wertheimer said.

He founded the group in 1984 as a cardiology practice and expanded it into a multi-specialty group in 1989. Today, the institute consists of 25 doctors in 11 specialties and 150 employees serving more than 40,000 patients.

The group occupies 30,000 square feet of a medical building near St. Lucie Medical Center, up from 2,000 square feet when it started. The facility includes its own blood lab and the state's first free-standing heart catheterization lab.

Wertheimer bought his first computer in 1986, but the manufacturer went bankrupt and he lost his investment. That taught him to be very careful in picking technology vendors.

In 1987, he installed his first practice management system and in 1992 added a rudimentary electronic medical record system that allowed doctors to dictate notes to be entered into the computer, but still required paper charts.

So in 2002, he and his colleagues began the search for an integrated, single-source system, evaluating more than 20 vendors. They settled on NextGen, a major national provider of integrated systems.

They started implementation of the practice management portion in May 2003, entering in all business records including every patient's insurance records. The group deals with more than 500 payers, each with multiple plans.

"You can't function without an electronic system today," Wertheimer said. "It's just too much for a small group."

They ran the new system simultaneously with the old for a time until most of the outstanding insurance payments had come in, leaving just cash outstanding. Then, they shut down the old system.

Next came implementation of the clinical system, which entailed the scanning in of more than 6 million pages of medical data. Ten people worked two shifts a day on high-speed scanners. By November 2003, the office was totally paperless.

With the addition of a few other functions, the system was totally implemented by July 2004. The charts were gone.

"Paper is the bane of quality care," Wertheimer said. "Things get lost. Information transfer is challenging, whether from doctor to doctor, doctor to nurse, or medical personnel to billing. Errors occur. Only one person can look at a paper chart, while multiple people can access the electronic record simultaneously for different purposes."

The Heart & Family Health Institute has a computer station in every exam room and a total of more than 200 stations at the facility. All of the practice's physicians type their orders and notes into the computer.

The cost savings have been substantial, according to Wertheimer. All in-house and outside transcribers, who previously

typed up the notes dictated by doctors, were eliminated at a savings of \$450,000 per year.

In-house employees were not laid off but reassigned to serve the fast-growing practice in other areas, saving another \$250,000 in staff that did not have to be hired. Savings in paper and supplies totaled another \$40,000. Off-site storage was axed at a savings of \$40,000 and the practice reclaimed 4,000 square feet of in-house storage space worth \$1 million.

"We changed space from clerical to clinical," Wertheimer said proudly.

The firm also introduced a practice archive and communication system, or PACS, which stores X-ray, Magnetic Resonance Imaging and computed tomography scan images electronically.

Since 98 percent of the firm's work is at St. Lucie Medical Center, the practice put a work station at the hospital so that doctors on call could access all the practice's patient records without having to go back to the office. And all doctors can access the records from home.

Today, paper coming from the outside is faxed into the system directly through a fax manager system and filed digitally. Other papers are scanned in.

The increase in speed is amazing. When a patient calls with a problem, the nurse accesses the records immediately, types in the patient's comments, the doctor checks his or her computer between office patients and enters orders. The nurse directs the patient, often within the hour. Likewise, lab results are entered immediately and the patient is often informed of results the same day the test was administered.

From a business standpoint, the computer can handle the different diagnostic codes for each patient. With an integrated system, the computer instantly tells what's payable and what's not under each patient's medical plan.

"The insurance claim is clean, so we get our payment faster," Wertheimer said.

Wertheimer estimates just 5 percent of practices nationwide are paperless. NextGen uses his institute as a show site to entice potential new customers.

Martin Memorial Health Systems

Hospitals face a set of problems different from individual physician practices, and have been a bit slower to adopt electronic systems.

William R. Bollig, chief information officer and assistant administrator at Martin Memorial Health Systems, points out that he has 300 to 400 private practice physicians to integrate into a new electronic system.

He said that vendors that develop software for hospitals are not as far along as those who supply individual practices. He cites the much higher costs for hospitals, with such considerations as in-patients and many more facilities, and the fact that hospitals must fund other capital projects.

Martin Memorial started with an IBM mainframe in the 1970s, used exclusively for billing, accounts receivable, payroll and general accounting purposes. The hospital began using clinical software from leading supplier Meditech in 1986, introducing electronic patient registration and terminals on the patient floors so that nurses and secretaries could enter orders. These became print-outs in blood and radiology labs, and results were then entered back into the system and printed out on the floors.

Bollig joined Martin Memorial in 1994 following a long information technology career at an Ohio hospital. He now heads a staff of 33 in information services, compared to just nine when the hospital began the computer age.

In 1995, Bollig introduced a perinatal system in obstetrics to track the entire birth process. The system captures fetal monitoring online, documents doctors and nurse actions, and includes data, pictures and text in one electronic record. He said tracking OB patient care is easier because fewer doctors are involved.

Since then, other areas have been added, including Martin Memorial's cancer center where the radiological oncologist inputs notes from a patient's other doctors, uses the computer to create a treatment plan, runs and monitors the treatment electronically and documents the treatment.

Martin Memorial's operating rooms use an electronic tracking system to locate each patient at each step of the process from pre-op to post-op. The system displays information at key points so all personnel are informed, up-to-the-minute. A similar system has just been installed in waiting rooms so that family and friends can also track the progress of their loved ones.

Electrocardiogram machines are now wireless. The doctor's orders go to portable EKG carts and results come back wirelessly to the cardiologist for reading. The old paper strip is now obsolete. And the process is much faster.

Martin Memorial is about to plunge into a virtually paperless world. A committee, including physicians, is now evaluating vendors with an eye toward visiting user sites, picking a system by this Fall and placing an order by January. Bollig expects implementation in 12 to 18 months and elimination of all paper in three to four years.

"I'm hoping that when we design a new practice area, we won't even design in a chart room," he said.

Like the Heart & Family Health Institute, Bollig expects a substantial return on investment through the elimination of most

transcription services, paper and supplies, as well as real estate to house paper records.

Martin Memorial's laptops are portable and wireless. Nurses take them to the bedside and pharmacists can match up drugs with a bar code on each patient's wrist band to prevent errors.

Rather than using cell phones, which don't work everywhere, Martin Memorial uses 225 wireless phones with access points throughout its buildings, Bollig said. He credits the phones with saving an amazing amount of staff time, especially for nurses.

Martin Memorial also stores images electronically, eliminating the need for most films. Surgeons still mount films in the operating rooms, but Bollig said he hopes to install large monitors to display the electronic pictures by next year.

Bollig said the next level of software, which includes order-entry for doctors, is expensive. While doctors will need to enter their own orders into the system, they will likely still have the option to dictate notes.

The system must have checks and balances built in to eliminate errors and build an audit trail for legal purposes.

"The electronic audit trail will be bigger than the actual record," Bollig said. "Every key stroke on every action will be recorded."

He also plans to use two-factor identification for physicians, including a unique badge that can be read in proximity to the computer and a doctor fingerprint.

As you might expect with more than 300 physicians in the health system, some embrace the electronic system and some don't. The Bollig says that attitudes are quickly changing.

"Two years ago, I had to force 99 percent of the doctors to even come to a meeting," he said. "Now, about half are pushing me to upgrade, another quarter are resigned to the changes and just a quarter are holding back."

Even doctors more accustomed to paper records are seeing that they can make more money and be more productive with an electronic system.

"I think we're ahead of more than half the hospitals in the United States in implementing these systems," Bollig said.

Indian River Medical Center

At Indian River Medical Center in Vero Beach, patient care outweighs cost savings, so executives there say it's difficult to quantify the dollars saved for every computer-related move.

"The primary driver for us is patient safety and quality," said chief operating officer W. Carl Martin.

Which is not say the center is stuck in the paper age. The center has digitized all radiological images at a savings of \$300,000 in \$350,000 in film annually, according to Martin.

Indian River introduced its hospital information system for business related functions in the early 1980s. The system runs on the popular AS 400 (now known as System i5) platform. It handles financial, accounting, orders, billing and admissions functions.

The hospital also has a long-running strategic relationship with McKesson, a healthcare services firm, for software. It ensures an integrated system for both business and clinical functions. In 1996, executives began installing more personal computers, and by 2000 introduced a clinical documentation system that allowed nurses, physical therapists, respiratory technicians and dieticians to chart electronically.

Two years later, hospital leaders introduced an electronic medical record system with lab and radiology results sent electronically to the patient's electronic chart. Physician orders, notes and medication administration records are still on paper and scanned.

The hospital uses wireless computers on wheels, better known as COWs, for use by nurses. These screens are also wheeled into the operating rooms for all personnel to access patient records and images. Electronic charting in the ORs is scheduled to go live in December.

The pharmacy is now paperless and expects to implement a bar code system in 2008-2009 to match patients and prescriptions to prevent errors.

All 234 staff doctors can pull up the system through the Internet from home, office or while traveling. Martin cites the case of neurosurgeons, who can view a CT scan in the middle of the night from an incoming emergency room patient and order the proper response immediately, whether it be surgery or simply observation.

Cardiologists can look at electrocardiograms and obstetrics doctors can remotely pull up what are called "fetal strips" with the latest information on a yet-to-be born baby and its mother, especially in cases of distress for either.

"Doctors can access whenever and wherever they need to," said Randy C. King, manager of information systems for the medical center, who heads a 20-person department.

Coming in 2008, King expects electronic charting in the emergency room. He said there hasn't been a good software package yet to meet emergency room needs, but he has now bought a new system from McKesson.

The labor and delivery area is currently operating two charting systems simultaneously, but King said that will go to one system next year.

King said he hopes to be paperless in about three years. The last piece will be introduction of a computer physician order entry system that uses templates. King said the software is not quite good enough yet and still expensive.

Martin and King both expect many physicians to continue to prefer dictation of reports and notes. They say voice recognition systems are getting better, so that the day will come when transcribers will only edit the electronic report for errors. This should reduce labor costs.

King said the move to electronic records can eliminate at least half the printers at the facility for a dollar saving in the six figures.

Indian River has a wireless phone system for all mobile workers within the hospital. A new cell phone push is beginning this month as AT&T installs a repeater on the roof which will tie into an already-existing cable throughout the hospital to improve cell phone reception.

For patients who travel or maintain a second home, the hospital uses an Internet-based system known as My Medical History, which contains their records. Patients can give their password to medical providers in other locations for Web access. The hospital will also put the record on a compact disc if the patient requests it.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

July 20, 2007

CyberKnife a cut above for some patients

A Palm Beach Gardens facility is bringing tumor-killing technology to the Treasure Coast. Unlike hospital-based centers that restrict access, CyberKnife Center is an open center, meaning any physician or radiation oncologist can bring patients to it.

The open CyberKnife Center represents the vision of Dr. James G. Schwade, who opened the northern Palm Beach County facility in October 2005 following the success of his first center in southern Miami-Dade County. Schwade wanted to start a center to give more access to patients, making the technology available to as many patients as possible.

"This is a more efficient way to bring the technology to the most patients, to utilize the technology, rather than have competition among hospitals and doctors," Schwade said.

The CyberKnife is not a knife at all but an advanced radiosurgery tool that uses a robotic arm and a laser beam to deliver an extremely high dose of radiation to a very precise tumor target. The ray can attack and eradicate a tumor of just 0.095 millimeters.

Because of the targeting, surrounding good tissue is not harmed. The arm can provide 1,200 different angles from which to target the tumor.

The CyberKnife uses no incision, so there is no blood, no anesthesia, no pain, and no recovery or rehabilitation time.

For most patients, three-to-five treatments of just one hour are needed, Schwade said, though he warns it's not a miracle cure.

"CyberKnife is niche technology, only applicable to a certain number of maladies," Schwade said. "It's not a panacea for everything."

A physicist plans the treatment and, using a sophisticated software program, enters it into the computer. An experienced radiation technician then uses the computer to control the cyber-knife.

Board-certified surgeons and radiation oncologists can be trained on the CyberKnife in a one-day orientation so that they can participate in the evaluation of patients as potential users and help plan and supervise the appropriate treatment.

Schwade points out that physicians using CyberKnife for the first time benefit from the large body of institutional knowledge accumulated through the experience of the doctors who have used the tool.

Schwade said CyberKnife is used for tumors of less than 6 centimeters. It works well for lung and prostate cancer patients who have exhausted other treatments like chemotherapy and conventional surgery.

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CyberKnife has also been used to treat brain tumors, as well as liver and pancreatic cancer.

Treasure Coast resident Joan Schwed is a big backer of CyberKnife after having the treatment for lung cancer more than a year ago. The 82-year-old also has emphysema and had previously had surgery for breast cancer and a different type of lung cancer. Her doctors recommended CyberKnife because she could not be operated on this time.

"It was absolutely incredible," Schwed said. "I went three days in a row, went home at night to dinner with my children in Palm Beach Gardens, and after the third treatment drove home to Fort

Pierce. I can't say enough good things about the people at CyberKnife and you can actually get a cure."

Because of its specificity of use and high cost, the Palm Beach and Miami CyberKnife centers combined treat just 400 patients each year.

Schwade runs the operations. He said he picked up his business skills along the way and found that business was not as hard as doctoring. To prove it, he was awarded the Golden Stethoscope Award by Florida Medical Business as the Physician Entrepreneur of the Year in 2005.

The center's services are based on the number of radiation beams used for each case, so the center does not quote prices.

"The cost of treatment varies depending on the complexity of an individual's situation," Schwade said.

Potential patients should work through his Miami center, he said, adding that, generally, Medicare and private insurance cover treatments.

Schwade has worked in radiation oncology for 30 years and radiosurgery for 20 years. Among other positions, he served as professor and chairman of the Department Of Radiation Oncology at the University of Miami School of Medicine, where he was also Associate Director for Clinical Research in the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center from 1987 to 1994.

Schwade worked extensively with Gamma Knife facilities in Miami, participating in more than 1,700 such procedures. The Gamma Knife is used primarily on brain tumors and requires the use of a frame screwed into the head. The CyberKnife has no such requirement.

"The Gamma knife is now obsolete in my opinion," he said.

In 1994, Schwade entered private practice, but spinal surgery forced him to stop seeing patients in 2000. It did open the door, however, for his entrepreneurial plunge into the business of CyberKnife centers.

"CyberKnife was now ready for prime time," he said.

The CyberKnife equipment alone costs \$4 million and a total center runs in the \$5 million to \$6 million. Schwade talked to hospitals and other doctors, but could find none who would join him, so he and his wife opened the Miami Center in 2003. The Miami center was the 12th in the United States. There are now 65, most hospital-based.

Attorney Stephen Pinkert partnered with Schwade to open the Palm Beach Center in 2005.

"We're serving 130 different physicians in three counties," he said. "This is the most efficient way to use the technology, which has limited application and is very expensive. It's best to be unaffiliated."

The open center has worked just as Schwade envisioned, but it is facing competition from centers opening in Stuart, Port St. Lucie and Melbourne.

To stay at the forefront of technology, a new Xsight Lung Tracking System, now in use by CyberKnife Center of Miami, will soon be available at the Palm Beach Gardens center. The new system eliminates the need for the markers which previously were inserted into the tumor for tracking during the CyberKnife procedure.

"Our treatment is now completely non-invasive," said Dr. Schwade. "We are the second medical facility in the United States to utilize the tracking system."

Schwade is also developing a proton therapy center which will be located somewhere in South Florida. The therapy is sophisticated radiosurgery option for cancer patients, including those who are not candidates for CyberKnife.

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July 15, 2007

Bonded Lightning striking it big on Treasure Coast

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

How do you strike it big in the nation's lightning capital? Design and install lightning and surge protection systems.

Bonded Lightning of Florida's sales have increased each year since its founding in 1973, with never a downward turn, according to founder and owner Dennis Dillon. Over the past four years, sales have increased 20 percent each year.

"This will be our best year ever," Dillon said.

The company serves businesses and consumers from Vero Beach to the Keys, with other customers in the Caribbean and a recent expansion to the Naples-Fort Myers area.

Dillon attributes his company's growth to dynamic growth of the Treasure Coast and South Florida, plus the reputation Bonded Lightning has built through providing a good job at a fair price. He points to dealings with the same people in the building trades for many years.

"I tell all my employees to put a smile on the customer's face," Dillon says. "Word-of-mouth referral is the best advertising."

Because it's a peninsula with water on three sides, Florida provides the evaporating water to make it the thunderstorm leader of the nation.

Lightning is the number one weather-related killer in Florida, accounting for more deaths than all other weather sources combined, according to the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration. Since 1959, lightning has killed 89 people in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties, the largest number of lightning deaths of any three contiguous counties in the United States. On average, two die and nine are injured by lightning each year in South Florida.

NOAA also reports damage losses from lightning in the United States total more than \$5 billion each year. With up to a million volts of power, lightning bolts rip through roofs, start fires and wipe out electrical and plumbing systems.

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Dillon says computers are more sensitive to lightning than previous devices and appliances.

Since computers now run virtually everything, one lightning strike can take down a company's operations.

Bonded Lightning installs lightning rods on the roofs of commercial and residential buildings, about one every 20 feet following National Fire Protection codes that direct what must be done to prevent fires.

When lightning strikes, it is simply trying to find the most direct route to the ground. Bonded Lightning's systems route the bolt to the ground so that it doesn't seek out the building's electrical or plumbing system.

Dillon debunks the common myth that lightning rods attract lightning. He says scientists still don't know why lightning strikes in one spot and not another.

Bonded Lightning buys the equipment from an Ohio manufacturer.

"We're their exclusive dealer in South Florida and their largest customer," Dillon says. "As a result, they give us a good price, which allows us to also provide a good price to our customers."

Dillon says commercial buildings make up about 95 percent of his customers. His residential segment is made up mostly of high-end homes. A normal commercial job requires one to two weeks, while a residence can usually be done in a day.

Business picks up in the summer when daily thunder showers increase in frequency. Dillon reports that when one house in a development gets struck by lightning, he tends to get a flurry of calls from anxious neighbors.

Hurricanes cause business to boom. "When the roof blows off, the lightning rods go with it, requiring reinstallation," Dillon says. "We're just getting caught up from 2004."

Bonded Lightning is the second-largest lightning protection company in the country, trailing only Bonded Lightning of Texas, which was started by family cousins but is now owned by others and is unrelated to the local firm.

The original Bonded Lightning was founded by the great grandfather of Dillon's wife, Diane, in 1892 in Washington D.C. Dillon earned a business management degree from the University of Maryland and worked for his wife's family business for a year as an installer.

"You have to learn by doing," he says.

In 1973, Dennis and Diane Dillon decided to move to Florida and strike out on their own.

He installed in the field by day and managed the office chores in the evening. Pregnant with her first child, Diane answered the phones.

They worked from their two-bedroom home in Riviera Beach, using the garage as a warehouse. A \$3,000 bank loan helped out.

"It was hand-to-mouth, but we were convinced it was a good business," Dillon said.

Dillon took advantage of the 1970s construction boom for high rise, oceanfront condominium buildings up and down the coast. He showed electrical contractors, the only workers doing lightning protection work, that he could do it cheaper because of his experience and the fact that it was his specialty. Most were happy to subcontract the work. Dillon also convinced designers, architects and engineers to get lightning protection into the original specifications.

By 1978, with their family growing, the Dillons built a new house on five acres in Jupiter Farms, then expanded it, and built a large barn-like structure out back for their equipment. Bonded

Lightning operated from that location until 2001 when, with the employees and trucks having grown too big for a residential neighborhood, Dillon built the present 10,000-square-foot building in Jupiter, just south of Indiantown Road.

The company's work load really took off during the 1990s when the boom in population combined with new state and county codes, which required lightning protection in all schools and hospitals. More people also meant more public buildings, like post offices, police stations, fire stations, city halls and wastewater treatment plants, all needing Bonded Lightning's services.

"We're doing 40 to 50 fire stations right now," Dillon says. "School and hospitals are constantly doing additions, and we've been working continuously for years at Miami International Airport,

where they always seem to be tearing down old buildings and putting up new."

Dillon says his biggest problem is lack of manpower. The company currently employs 50, but could expand to 100 over the next few years. Dillon prefers high school graduates but can take non-grads as well.

New employees learn on the job by going out with veteran workers.

"I have to take care of my employees because I don't want them to leave after I've spent money training them," he said. "Lots of my employees have worked here for many years."

Dillon is moving toward the day when his six children will take over the company. All work for Bonded Lightning, with the eldest son, Pat, taking over his dad's duties of running day-to-day operations.

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June 15, 2007

Limberis name plastered all over downtown Fort Pierce

BYLINE: **Bill Church** correspondent

A grandfather-grandson duo, working with little fanfare, have played key roles in first creating, and then recreating, historic downtown Fort Pierce over the past century.

The thousands of downtown Fort Pierce workers and tourists who walk around with eyes down may miss the artistry and craftsmanship of Nicholas and

Marty Limberis. Those who take a moment to look up, however, are rewarded with a glimpse of the stucco work and carefully molded artistic medallions

and sculptures which make the downtown buildings truly unique.

Nicholas Limberis, who died in 1976 at the age of 97, came to America in 1888 as a nine-year-old stowaway on a cargo ship from Greece. After working at

his uncle's New York cigar store for a few years, the teenager joined his brothers in Eustis, near Orlando. He then ventured further south in the first

decade of the 20th Century to an area on Route 1 near the present St. Lucie County-Indian River County line, where he homesteaded some land and

purchased more.

Having learned the plastering and stucco trade from his father in Greece, Nicholas began Limberis Plastering. He proved to be much more than a plasterer.

He was also a natural artist, who, with no formal training, developed the skill of making sculptures, using chicken wire to form a mold and mixing Portland cement, lime, sand, and water to make a mud.

His mushroom sculptures became famous, especially as birdbaths. He also created animals and birds, making each by hand with just an hour with

which to work before the material hardened.

His most visible work lives today on buildings throughout downtown Fort Pierce. He worked extensively with famed architect William Hatcher who

designed many of these buildings.

Marty Limberis was a child of 10 when he began watching his grandfather work and helping him

mix cement and water in a big tub. He also learned the art of making sculptures from the master before he passed away when Marty was just 17.

Now 48, Marty is founder and owner of Marty Limberis Plastering. With the rebirth of downtown Fort Pierce over the past decade, Marty has played a key role in restoring historic buildings. Much of that work has involved remaking and saving the original work of his own grandfather.

"When someone is looking to refurbish a historic building they see the Limberis name in the history books," Marty said. "I can match any of the old textures and sculptures, I have many of my grandfather's original molds, and I can make new molds. I meet the criteria for historic preservation."

Some of the famous buildings featuring the work of both grandfather and grandson include:

- * The Arcade Building on Route 1
- * Old City Hall
- * Raulerson Building at Second Street and Avenue A
- * Kraaz & Kraaz Building next door

* Original Coast Guard station on Seaway Drive, Hutchinson Island

Probably no building shows off Grandfather Nicholas' work more than the Arcade Building on Route 1. He made the colored blocks that surround the main entrance and the shield over the entrance, as well as the ship sculptures that dot the building.

To renovate the building, Marty took down about 30 percent of the wall work and remade it using old molds. For the rest, he touched up and tuck-pointed, re-carving everything to make it look as it did in 1925.

For the four-story Kraaz & Kraaz Building, Marty duplicated his grandfather's medallion from Old City Hall.

Nicholas did all of the interior and exterior plaster and stucco work on the old Coast Guard Station, now the Indian River Community College Marine Science Center. Marty restored it.

Marty has also done either interior plastering or exterior stucco work on Old City Hall, the restored Sunrise Theater, the Seven Gables House visitor's center on Indian River Drive, and the extensive restoration of virtually all the commercial block of Orange Avenue between Second Avenue and the railroad tracks.

The 307 Orange Avenue building shows what Limberis can do. It was also a case of history repeating itself.

The grandfather of Philip C. "Flip" Gates constructed the building and hired Marty's grandfather to install capitals on the building's columns.

In 2005 and 2006, Gates, an architectural enthusiast, hired Marty to repair the badly damaged capitals. Using just a piece of old concrete cut off one capital, Marty made a new mold and re-created the capitals to look just as they did when new.

After graduating from Fort Pierce Central High School in 1976, Marty went to work as a laborer for East Coast Plastering. He credits owner Paul Goodman with teaching him the plastering trade.

In 1990, Marty went out on his own and has grown the business to eight full time workers and a service area that covers Florida with occasional jobs in Alabama and South Carolina.

Marty says his is one of the last interior plastering companies in Florida. Most home builders now use drywall. His artistry with exterior stucco and historical renovation has set him apart, however, and he continues to be a "hands-on" contractor.

Limberis says the materials have improved since his grandfather's day, with cements that provide better workability and elasticity, as well as improved waterproofing. But the sand, he said, was actually better in the old days.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

June 15, 2007

Sweet's Jewelers: 81 years of service and going strong

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Downtown Fort Pierce has experienced many changes over the past 81 years, but one constant has been Sweet's Jewelers.

Rosalie Arnold, now 74, has been there for more than half a century, beginning work in the store in 1945 when she was just 12.

"I learned the business from my father and brother so I could wait on customers," Arnold said.

Arnold is the daughter of the former owner, John Noelke, who bought the store and building in 1943 from Lillian Sweet and her son, Ervin. The Sweet family opened the store in 1926, and along with East Coast Lumber, Sweet's is the longest continuing business in downtown Fort Pierce.

Arnold runs the store today with her daughter, Jan Russell. Both women credit the store's long-running success to custom designs and personal services that beat mall jewelry stores. Arnold said Sweet's doesn't buy in bulk.

"We hand pick all our jewelry from salespeople and shows," she said.

It was the coming of the Route 1 strip malls and then the bigger outlying malls which hurt many downtown businesses. But Sweet's Jewelry's customers stayed loyal.

"We stuck it out through the bad times because our customers stuck with us," Russell said. "And, they have provided great word-of-mouth referrals."

John Noelke had owned a jewelry store in Washington, Mo., a St. Louis suburb. That store is still owned by Arnold's cousins.

Noelke was a watchmaker and repaired jewelry. When he first moved to the Treasure Coast in 1938, however, he invested in citrus groves near Orange Avenue and 33rd Street.

Using his jewelry experience, he added Sweet's to the family enterprise in 1943. The store was extremely successful during World War II because of the naval amphibious base on the beach. Jewelry

was in short supply as manufacturing plants switched to ammunition production and supplied jewelry only to already established customers, like Sweet's.

Servicemen flocked to the store to buy jewelry to take home to their wives, sweethearts and mothers. The store would be almost stripped bare and the Noelke family would buy every piece they could when the jewelry salesmen dropped in, Arnold recalls.

She said the business has changed somewhat because of different tastes and rising prices.

"Women today seem to want bigger diamonds," she said. "And the price of gold is now \$700 a gram, compared to \$18 a gram when I started in the business."

Noelke worked until he was 86, and he was 99 when he passed away in 1983.

John and his wife, Alma, had five children, three of whom worked in the jewelry store. In addition to Rosalie Arnold, her brother, Lee, retired just two years ago and her sister Margaret, still does pearl restringing from her home. Two other brothers who worked in other fields are deceased.

The family owners have also been blessed with long-term employees. Saleswoman Ann Demanbro worked there for 30 years before her death a decade ago. Saleswoman Anita Young has worked at the store for 21 years and jewelry designer and repair specialist Michael Huff is a 15-year employee.

"It's a friendly place to work with lots of nice customers," Young said.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

May 18, 2007

TurboCombustor flying high

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Where did Martin County's eighth largest employer get its start? If you guessed Gas City, Ind., you are either an expert on airplane engines or a dyed-in-the-wool Hoosier.

TurboCombustor Technology started in 1951 as Hoosier Metal Spinners, which became Hoosier Metal Fabricators before moving to Stuart in 1967 with just 20 employees and \$3 million to \$4 million in revenues.

"Their main customer then was Pratt & Whitney in West Palm Beach, so they decided to be located in the north in the winter when we can move to Florida near our key client," said Stuart Shay, the company's co-president with Louis Surette.

The company now employs more than 350 local residents in its 109,000-square-foot facility on Southeast Commerce Avenue, and in a smaller plant on Southeast Slater Street, both in Stuart.

TurboCombustor manufactures combustors and complex sheet-metal fabrications for major aircraft engine manufacturers such as General Electric, Rolls-Royce, Pratt & Whitney, Pratt & Whitney Canada, Volvo, Honeywell, Hamilton Sundstrand and the U.S. government.

Revenues grew to \$50 million in 2006.

A combustor for an aircraft's gas turbine engine acts like a carburetor in an automobile engine. Both mix air and fuel and, with a spark, generate combustion. In the gas turbine engine, the high temperature air exiting the combustor causes the turbine shaft to rotate, generating thrust, which pushes the aircraft forward.

The company also makes complex sheet metal fabrications, forgings and castings, which are processed into final assembly. Employees drill holes with lasers to provide cooling air flow and thermal barrier coating to protect their parts, which are in the hottest part of the engine with temperatures in the 2,000-2,200 degrees Fahrenheit range. They also measure the air flow to verify adequate relative cooling.

"The technology is totally different today than it was when the company moved to Stuart, but it's still the same principal -- take flat sheet metal, make it round, weld it," Shay said. "A major development, laser hole drilling, came in the 1990s, along with higher-performance aircraft engines with increased heat."

TurboCombustor doesn't design parts. It works from customer drawings and conducts "concurrent engineering" with the customers' in-house staffs. Shay said his customers are his major competitors, since they could make the parts in-house.

The workload would be too heavy, however, so the trend is toward even more outsourcing by the original equipment manufacturers.

The company faces market pressures from the steadily rising cost of the nickel, cobalt and titanium-based alloys used in manufacturing.

"Our challenge is to find how we can be competitive," Shay explains. "We're investing in capital equipment to make parts faster. We need to increase capacity and drop our costs."

TurboCombustor Technology underwent an ownership change in 2004 when CAI Funds and AeroEquity bought the company from Chromalloy Gas Turbine Corp., which had owned the company since 1980.

The sale was good for TurboCombuster, according to Shay. Since Chromalloy's business was 80 percent repair, they were competing with General Electric, which just happens to be TurboCombuster's major customer.

Chromalloy was also manufacturing some GE parts. Understandably, GE was in no mood to give TurboCombuster any more business while Chromalloy as its parent company.

On another front, Chromalloy had engaged in a long legal battle with Pratt & Whitney, costing TurboCombuster that major piece of business. When the sale was completed in 2004, TurboCombuster quickly made clear to Pratt & Whitney executives that it wanted to renew relationships, and that process is now successfully underway.

"They present a major growth opportunity," Shay said.

Another benefit of the sale is the designation of TCT as a small business rather than as a division of a large corporation, which helps when bidding for government contracts.

Shay, 66, was a Chromalloy veteran, joining that company in 1981 after 18 years at aerospace company Hamilton Sundstrand. A mechanical engineer by training, Shay moved into sales and marketing, assuming responsibility for TurboCombuster and four other Chromalloy divisions. As TurboCombuster grew, Shay concentrated on that division, moving here in 1986.

In 2000, Shay and Louis Surette were named co-general managers of the division and then co-presidents of the new company in 2004 when CAI and AeroEquity took over.

Surette, 58, joined Chromalloy in 1997 as vice president and chief financial officer of the division from the Stuart operations of another aerospace giant, Northrup Grumman, where he spent 29 years, mostly in Boston.

Both men report to a four-person board of directors, with one from each fund and two independent members.

Common business wisdom says a co-president structure has little chance of success, but Shay and Surette say it works well for them.

"Our success is based on mutual respect and trust," Shay said. "We bring different skill sets and we don't care who gets credit. We don't agree on everything and we have robust discussions, but we always end up with a decision that is best for the business."

Surette agrees, especially as to the mutual respect, balanced set of skills and heated debates.

"In the long run, our system provides a real advantage by bringing different points of view to come to a conclusion," Surette said. "To head off another problem which can occur with co-leaders, we decided from the beginning against splitting up the duties. Since we share the entire responsibility, we don't have various office factions working against each other."

Shay and Surette recently hired 25-year General Electric veteran Les Saunders as vice president of operations to run day-to-day matters. Saunders is also overseeing the integration of two newly acquired companies in Cincinnati and Budapest into the TurboCombuster family.

With the current management team, the co-presidents are optimistic about TurboCombustor's prospects. The company has a good portfolio of products and a growing backlog thanks to new long term agreements with customers, Surette said. It also has a new financing to add machines, equipment and space.

Shay said he expects the company to hire more workers, raising total employment above 400 over the next three to four years while growing revenues to the \$70 million to \$80 million range.

Last year, the company bought Treasure Coast Machine on Slater Street, not far from TurboCombuster's Commerce Street main plant. The machine company was started by an ex-TurboCombuster employee and does turning and milling of engine parts, castings and forgings. It employs 30 people in a 10,000-square-foot facility.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

May 18, 2007

Brooks braces for success

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

At an age when most men are engaged in making birdies, catching fish or filing for Medicare, Stuart resident Gene Brooks is just getting started.

He's co-owner with his wife, Lolly, of one tree farm, general manager of another such farm, and now he owns a fast-growing new business featuring a product he invented.

Brooks, 64, first got the idea for a new kind of steel-and-plastic brace to support newly-planted trees in 1978. He had his

prototype witnessed by a patent attorney, but just never found the time or money to proceed.

"It's a very expensive process and I was short of dollars," Brooks said.

The Brooks Tree Brace came about from Gene's own long experience in the tree farm business where he planted and braced thousands of trees using the generally accepted 2-foot-by-4-foot wood legs, steel banding and burlap.

"It was invented out of necessity," he said.

Finally, in 2002, Brooks decided to forge ahead and produce his new metal and plastic tree brace. He found a Thailand company to manufacture his product and began finding buyers, especially here in Florida.

Unlike the old wood, binding and burlap system, the Brooks Tree Brace has adjustable steel legs and plastic support heads with rubber pads to protect the tree. All metal parts are powder coated and all plastic parts are protected from ultraviolet rays for longer life.

The brace has three legs but can accommodate four or five if necessary. They are held in the ground with metal stakes. Reflective decals on the legs warn passersby.

Brooks said his tree support is quicker to install and is less expensive over the long term because it is reusable.

The old wood-and-banding system requires two workers and 25 minutes to install, with chain saws, expensive banding tools and nails.

BRACING 18

The braces are usually on from four to 10 months while the tree roots. Then, workers must return and haul away the old materials, which have often deteriorated or been damaged.

In comparison, according to Brooks, one person can install his brace in just two minutes using a hammer and two wrenches, along with the special key which Brooks supplies for both installation and security.

The brace can be reused so that the owner saves money beginning with the second use. Since the oldest models are just now five years old and holding up well, Brooks doesn't yet know how many times they may be reused, but at least five or six times thus far.

"It's the only system a homeowner can do himself," Gene said. "The customer needs no special tools."

There are four models of the brace -- two adjustable and two non-adjustable -- of various sizes. They support trunks of 3 inches to 14 inches in diameter and tree heights up to 25 feet. Each brace weighs between 15 and 25 pounds and retails for \$35 to \$55.

Gene and Lolly used the local market to work out the inevitable bugs that crop up with any new products. They changed the size of the belt, for example, and insisted on better quality powder coating to protect the steel.

Sales have been good thus far with very little marketing. After selling 3,000 in their first business year, sales in 2006 were more than 6,000.

Their best year, as you might expect, came following the 2004 hurricanes, when they sold out of more than 12,000 braces.

"You have a window of about two weeks after the storm to stand up the blown-down trees and save them," Gene said. "The brace should not be used during a hurricane because it holds firm and the top of the tree will snap off."

This was confirmed in tests last fall by University of Florida researchers, who found the brace the strongest above-ground system.

Thus far, the best customers have been homeowners, developers and government agencies in Florida, including Port St. Lucie, West Palm Beach, Boynton Beach and Delray Beach. Brooks is talking to parks and recreation departments now about stocking up on tree braces before hurricane season starts.

The Brooks are also shipping to customers in other states through their Web site. They are also considering the use of distributors nationwide.

Gene was born in Stuart but raised in Palm Beach County. He started working in the flower business at 14 while still attending Lake Worth High School. He then moved on to landscaping, nurseries and finally tree farms.

He started the Oasis Tree Farm near Pahokee which grew to include more than 300,000 field-grown trees on 850 acres.

In 2004, he sold the business to Tree Town USA, a large company with container nurseries in Texas, but stayed on as general manager of the Pahokee facility.

Gene and Lolly also own Grassy Waters Growers in Pahokee, which Lolly manages. Grassy Waters grows and sells hundreds of thousands of container trees each year, which are then sold to Oasis and other companies for field growing.

With the brace business starting to boom, the Stuart couple has no plans to retire.

"What else would we do?" Lolly said. "We love to work."

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April 20, 2007

Dyer Aqua keeping seafood on our plates without depleting oceans

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Our insatiable demand for seafood is outstripping the ability of the world's oceans to produce it. A Sebastian-based company is ready to help make up the difference.

Dyer Aqua is a marine aquaculture company with a staff of experienced scientists who conduct research and grow saltwater fish for food. If you'd rather watch fish than eat them, the company is also a leading producer of those Nemo-like, multi-colored ornamental fish for the pet store and public aquarium markets.

Since buying all the stock of the former American Aqua Resources in 1999 and changing the name, the investors in Dyer Aqua have sunk \$22 million into research and development.

Although American and Dyer were all research, the main goal was always production. Dyer started marketing ornamental fish in 2002 and some fish for food in 2003.

Most previous research had been on cold-water and fresh-water fish. Seeing a global appetite was pushing up seafood prices, Dyer scientists began research to see which warm water species could be grown. They settled first on pompano, cobia and tripletail, which grow fast. Snapper takes longer to produce.

Now, Dyer is the only company raising pompano and tripletail, according to chief executive officer Roderick Reed. Financially, it's been all out-go thus far, but that is about to change.

"The vision is great," Reed said. "We expect to produce 5 million pounds of fish and \$20 million in revenues in 2008."

Reed estimates the market for food fish at more than \$11 billion. That's much larger than the \$100 million ornamental market. Food fish will be Dyer's major product, but the company will continue to be a key supplier of ornamental fish for consumer and commercial markets.

"We can use the science from our food fish and ornamental fish research to improve both," Reed said. "Ornamentals are a 'feel good' business."

Ornamental fish buyers like to buy domesticated fish because they are accustomed to living in a tank and eating man-made food. Many more survive, while ornamental fish captured in the wild often die in the transition to a tank.

Ornamentals are neither to cheap or easy to produce. They must be kept in small pens, unlike food fish, which are housed in ocean pens of 800,000 gallons. Since appearance is so important to aquarium owners, ornamentals have higher quality-control standards.

Dyer has more than 60 species but is not currently looking for new ornamental fish.

"We see long-term expansion," Reed concludes. "Science has created a new business, it's something that's needed, and we can now make money at it. We expect to be the dominant producer of warm water fish."

He likes the aquaculture industry for several reasons.

"We don't do any genetic modifications and since we control the diet, we know at all times what's been put into the fish," Reed said.

Dyer carries out research and development, broodstock and hatchery operations at its facilities in Sebastian and Vero Beach. Production occurs at permitted, grow-out pens off the coasts of the Bahamas, Panama, and soon, Belize.

Reed said the United States has little experience with marine aquaculture. Most states have not favored aquaculture within their three-mile shore limits, fearing the possible environmental impact of discharges from the pens.

Those fears are unfounded, he said. "Discharges are small and are dispersed by the currents. We monitor the pens daily to maintain high quality and we must meet rigorous standards to maintain our permits."

Dyer employs 16 people in Sebastian and another three in Vero Beach. About four in five have a scientific background, most are under 35, and they represent a number of nationalities. The company expects to add six to eight workers in the near future.

Dyer Aqua suffered a severe setback in the twin hurricanes of 2004. All four company facilities in Sebastian, Vero Beach, Puerto Rico and the Bahamas were hit twice. The main building in Sebastian collapsed and had to be razed to the foundation and rebuilt to new building codes. It should be operating again in September.

Surprisingly, most tanks were not damaged and 300,000 fish survived in Sebastian, including the valuable broodstock.

"If you lose the breeders you're in trouble," said Nick Nevid, the company's chief scientist and head of operations who has been with the firm since 1994. "It can take years to replace them from the wild."

April 20, 2007

Manning Financial Group among Best Places to Work in county

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Have you ever thought one of your co-workers has a better work life than you do, and you would be much happier if you could just get his or her job?

If you worked for Don and Melody Manning at Manning Financial Group in Sebastian, you could get that opportunity each year during "musical chair week." All employees must rotate through the various positions different from their own.

"Other peoples' jobs look easier, but just try it for a day and you might think differently," Don said.

"Nobody wants the front desk," Melody laughed.

Musical chair week is just one employee-friendly strategy that has earned Manning Financial Group the designation as one of Indian River County's Best Places to Work for the past three years. Manning was one of three companies so designated in the 50-employee-and-under category in a study commissioned by the Treasure Coast Human Resources Association. The study gives all participants a full report on successful practices used to attract and retain employees.

Manning beat the survey average in turnover rate, money spent on per-employee training, hours of training per employee and percentage of employees enrolled in a 401(k) plan and a profit sharing plan.

Manning stood out in other ways. For example, employees can express gratitude for assistance from a coworker by giving that colleague "paid time off" from their own bank of hours. The owners can also add to each employee's paid time-off bank to recognize a special effort. The Mannings have been known to throw in an extra day's pay, as Melody did last week for everyone's long hours in preparing a booth at a consumer auto show.

Why do the Mannings do it?

"We have highly trained employees and we believe in taking care of them," Don said. "It's cheaper to retain employees, then hire and train new ones."

Don said he asks his workers what they would do if they owned the company.

"They have good ideas," he said. "You can learn as much from your employees as you can from any book."

Melody adds that she and Don are only as good as their employees.

"Too many employers lack the attitude for gratitude," she said.

Manning Financial Group grew out of the unpleasant experience the Mannings had when they sought a construction loan upon moving to Sebastian from Fort Lauderdale in 1989.

"They took a very long time to approve the loan. They changed it from a fixed loan to an adjustable-rate mortgage and gave us a hard time," Melody said. "When we wanted to add a pool after the house was completed, the bank turned us down because we hadn't lived there long enough. They jerked us around."

While many people would bemoan their fate, Don saw a need for a new kind of mortgage company. A nurse by background with additional training in humanistic psychology and educational therapy, he began to research the requirements for a mortgage license.

His home study paid off when he passed the state exam. Wanting to found an agency offering many services, Don also earned licenses in: real estate; health, life and property and casualty insurance; and auctioneering.

With too many state regulations to track, Don kept only the mortgage and real estate licenses and the result is Manning Financial Group.

"We wanted to give the consumer knowledge and to handle all the paperwork for both buyer and real estate agent," Melody said. "We had to create a new way of thinking among real estate agencies."

Like all mortgage companies, Manning Financial Group is feeling the effects of slower home sales, but Don remains confident. "I have 14 years of client business behind me and lots of repeat business."

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

March 16, 2007

Woman building dreams for those seeking affordable housing

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

What started as the purchase of an Okeechobee County weekend family retreat has turned into a whole new career for a former marketer and advertising woman from Jupiter.

Stephanie Scambler Young and her husband, Greg, have been partners in Young Development Co. for most of their now 18-year marriage. The company remodeled and built in both the residential and commercial markets, but three years ago Greg decided to build only in the commercial sector and joined with a partner in a new firm.

An advocate for affordable housing, Stephanie jumped at the chance to take Young Development into that market as a woman home builder in the male-dominated construction field.

She began buying individual lots in Okeechobee County where the couple had owned property for more than 12 years to use as a country getaway for their two sons. With six houses now complete and four more soon to come, Young is already looking for land to hold a small development of five to 10 new homes.

All her houses sell for \$200,000 and below. Why did she choose this niche rather than building more profitable luxury homes?

"The buyers are very appreciative," Young said. "For some, it's their first home. There's a need as well as a market."

She insists on keeping quality in the homes she builds, a tall order at the lower prices she charges.

"I give up a little of my profit," Young said. "It doesn't cost that much more to build quality. I'm not doing this to get rich. I get satisfaction."

Young hires all her subcontractors from Okeechobee County, believing that's the right thing to do to serve the local community. She pays them quickly so they can make their payrolls. Working with predominantly male crews has also presented few if any problems according to Young, who said she was raised to treat men and women with equal respect.

"I work with great people," Young said. "I'm loyal to them and they to me."

Young is personally involved on site at least four days a week and is always in contact. She credits her early success to her skills in keeping all the trades working together. Everything in home building has to be done in order, and the project can fall behind if subcontractors get held up for a day or two.

Young cites her recent accomplishment of pouring two slabs in November and collecting certificates of occupancy just 13 weeks later.

"I'm a problem solver," Young said. "I make things work."

Problems like the theft of more than \$4,000 worth of electric wiring stripped from one of her houses still lacking the drywall.

Young learned building first from her dad, a schoolteacher who built houses on the side to earn extra money. He had always been a handyman. She picked up more knowledge from her husband, who has a degree in finance but elected to get his general contractors license and resume a love of construction first nurtured in his high school

and college days.

She will soon go for her certified builder's license, adequate for construction of structures no higher than three floors. Until then, her general contractor husband signs off on the work.

Young is a native of northern Palm Beach County and a Jupiter High School graduate. She attended Palm Beach Community College and Florida State University before earning her Bachelor of Arts degree in Marketing from Florida Atlantic University.

With a desire to get into real estate development, Young attended law school for a year before starting Scambler and Associates, a marketing and boutique advertising agency with leisure and hotel clients, and then a specialty in marketing for shopping centers. Following the birth of sons Austin and Bradley, now both teenagers, she kept just a few clients before joining her husband in Young Development.

And now, she makes the long commute from Jupiter to Okeechobee to oversee her own home building projects.

"I enjoy the satisfaction of seeing something I built and knowing it will be there for many years," Young said.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

March 16, 2007

Guatelinda owner helping to shape a better community

BYLINE: Bill Church BJ contributor

Back in the Guatemala of the 1980s, a country racked by civil wars, military coups and bloodshed, Andres Cruz dreamed of being a businessman.

A social worker with the health department in his hometown, Cruz believed that if he put forth the energy he would realize his dream someday.

Today, he's the proprietor of Guatelinda, a successful Indiantown grocery store and restaurant featuring Latin products and homemade Guatemalan dishes serving the close-knit Guatemalan and Mexican communities.

Cruz does the cooking, turning out one soup and three entrees every day, one each with pork, beef and chicken. His wife works in the restaurant and his three children have all put in time after school and on weekends.

Andres Cruz dispenses more than Latin American products and Guatemalan food. Through the years, Cruz has become a leader for Indiantown's Guatemalan community.

Working with the Guatemalan consulate in Miami, he has helped with human-rights issues and the complicated process of obtaining legal status in the United States. Many immigrants sought political asylum as they fled Guatemala's 36 years of governmental and social upheaval.

His close ties to the consulate helped in February when he organized and sponsored the visit of Guatemalan President Oscar Berger to Indiantown.

The Guatemalans of Indiantown have repaid him with their loyalty. Cruz started his store by borrowing money from members of the community. He has paid them all back.

Cruz estimates that sales have doubled since he first opened the store in 1998 and the restaurant in 1999. He credits his success to the relationships he has built within the Latin community.

"I like Indiantown because it's a small town, like my hometown in Guatemala," Cruz said. "The community goes to the same church and we help each other out when needed."

It's been a long road for Cruz, as it has been for many Guatemalan immigrants. He crossed through Mexico and came to the United States in 1983, leaving behind his wife and two children. His first stop was California, where he became a laborer.

Three years later, he made the cross country trek to Indiantown, which had attracted a number of Guatemalans. He began by picking vegetables and fruit, and he and his family gained legal status under the amnesty provisions of the U.S. Immigration Reform and Control

Act of 1986.

Cruz learned English and began volunteering at Indiantown's Holy Cross Catholic Church service center, helping the Mayan Guatemalan community. Cruz points out that many Guatemalans speak one of the 22 different Mayan dialects, rather than Spanish.

With his background in social work, Cruz changed his avocation into his vocation by founding a not-for-profit group called Corn Maya with his wife, his brother-in-law and Geronimo Camposeco, who now heads the organization from Jupiter.

With assistance from University of Florida Anthropology Professor Allan Burns, they earned grants from foundations and raised money through events like dances and cultural events.

Cruz headed Corn Maya for nine years until 1995, when he opened a for-profit service center offering phone booths and help with phone calls to Guatemala and Mexico. He added CDs and cassettes, then clothes and shoes.

A temporary detour took him to Fort Pierce where he opened a gas station and small grocery store which failed. In 1998, Cruz began renting his present location on Warfield Boulevard and Guatelinda began selling Latin groceries, adding the restaurant in 1999.

Cruz' dreams of success are coming to fruition. His oldest daughter is attending Jacksonville University and another daughter is soon to graduate from South Fork High School and join her sister at Jacksonville. His youngest is a 12-year-old son at home.

"If you keep working on your dreams, one day it will be," Cruz said. "Today, I dream my kids will be professionals."

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February 16, 2007

Tradition Square growing with mix of restaurants, shops

BYLINE: Bill Church BJ contributor

To gain a true picture of shopping at the Town of Tradition, you need to exit I-95 and wend your way past the big-box shopping center under construction to the true center of town, Tradition Square. There, the only big shop is a Publix Super Market, which anchors a mix of smaller stores, restaurants and independent upscale boutiques serving Tradition residents and visitors.

Tradition Square is a pedestrian-friendly area where Core Communities Director of Leasing Andrea Mrozek said her focus was on providing service to the Tradition community.

"We wanted to make sure we had the basic services -- barber, dry cleaners, groceries -- but we also sought out a mix of restaurants and boutiques to offer items like home decor, garden and children's clothes," Mrozek said. "We intentionally went after

independents and small local chains, rather than big national chains."

Despite the emphasis on Tradition customers, Mrozek said Tradition Square has been drawing shoppers from Vero Beach to Stuart.

Many shop owners also live in Tradition. Jessica Soumoff and her sister Patricia share both a residence and ownership of Salty Home, a home boutique with an eclectic mix of merchandise.

The Soumoffs moved from Long Island. Jessica earned a retailing degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan and worked at large stores and several smaller boutiques.

Salty Home was one of the first stores to open in Tradition Square in December 2005. It features furniture and home accent pieces, women's accessories, men's gifts and kids' collectibles and toys.

"If we see something we like and can display it, we'll bring it in," Jessica said.

The store had gross sales in January that doubled results for the same month of 2006. Jessica credits the easy-going atmosphere and special personality that an independent store can provide.

"Our customers feel relaxed and they become our friends," she said. "They come back often so the merchandise turns over very quickly."

The newest merchants and residents of Tradition also moved here from Long Island. Rosanna and Christopher Ferretti opened Couture Kids in early January and moved into their new Tradition home on Feb. 6.

The Ferrettis had a fine-food catering and pizza business on Long Island. As the mother of children ages 9 and 5, Rosanna became very familiar with lines and designers of children's clothing. She decided to open a high-end children's apparel, toys and gift shop.

Couture Kids features kids' clothing lines often found in Nordstrom, Bloomingdale's and Neiman-Marcus, but the Ferretis keep the price point a bit lower.

When Rosanna couldn't find the popular Webkinz animals any closer than West Palm Beach, she also began stocking them. Webkinz was voted the top toy in America at a recent industry show, and Rosanna said can't keep them in stock.

The newest restaurant at Tradition Square is also upscale and is owned by new Tradition residents. Chef Mark Zollo and his wife, Theresa, opened Cornerstone Bistro in late January.

After a long career in both family and exclusive restaurants, Zollo was recruited by the wealthy Horvitz family of Hollywood to be its private chef.

"That job gave me the opportunity to work with the finest food, beverages, china, and silverware in the world," Zollo said.

Horvitz family members liked to talk with Zollo for hours while he worked. He brought the same concept to his restaurant, with tables facing the open kitchen so that diners can watch Zollo and his cooks at work.

In addition to his cooking skills, Zollo also brought his handyman touch to the restaurant, doing all the woodwork, stainless steel and painting.

Cornerstone Bistro is a family affair. Theresa runs the front of the house. Her 20-year-old daughter, Nicole, busses tables and is learning the business.

Committed to his neighbors, Zollo will shut down the restaurant and rent it out for private parties if residents request it.

"We're here to serve the neighborhood," Zollo said.

Gina Grothe and her mother Barbara Marzulli were the first to open at Tradition Square in December 2005 when they welcomed customers to Sanctuary Day Spa.

Grothe worked previously in sales and marketing for a corporate aviation service, while Marzulli is a recognized leader in skin care who worked for others over the past 20 years.

They provide what they call 50 pampering treatments, including massage therapy, skin care, anti-aging treatment, nails, body treatments, waxing and professional make-up service.

Grothe splits her time between providing nail and body treatments to customers and managing the spa, including marketing and payroll.

"I basically live and breathe this," Grothe said. "I'm here six days a week from open to close, but it's very rewarding."

She said Tradition is the right location for business. Sales were 50 percent higher this January than a year earlier. She said the spa is heavily booked, especially on Saturdays.

Grothe notes the value to customers of a locally owned business.

"We pride ourselves on service," she said, "because we see our clients on a daily basis around the complex and in the Tradition Square stores."

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February 16, 2007

Business a family affair at PSL's Creative Catering

BYLINE: Bill Church BJ contributor

So much for retirement.

Three years ago, Steve and Nancy Huszar moved to the Treasure Coast, leaving behind Steve's 30-year career as a Toms River, N.J., police officer and Nancy's popular downtown breakfast and lunch diner for a life of Florida leisure.

Today, they are the proud owners of West End Grill on St. Lucie West Boulevard and, since Jan. 1, Creative Catering, which is booking events into 2008.

Last year, managers at the Spring Hill Suites off Peacock Boulevard asked Nancy, 54, and Steve, 57, to take over the hotel's catering operation in a building separated from the main lobby by a short walkway.

"We were getting so many requests to rent out West End Grill, but we couldn't do that," Nancy said.

For two months late last fall, they renovated the hotel space with fresh paint and new drapes, furniture, lighting and audio-visual equipment, all under the direction of daughter, Karyn, 30, an interior designer.

The renovated area seats up to 175 for business meetings and 110 for weddings in one 1,600-square-foot room or up to four rooms of equal size separated by dividers. An outside patio near the pool adds another 500 square feet.

The catering facility is booked almost every day, sometimes with several events a day. They had 40 bookings in January after opening.

"The area obviously needed a place like this," Nancy said. "Springhill Suites has been great to us."

The business is an all-family affair. In addition to her design duties, Karyn handles event planning and booking. Son Andrew, 24, manages the West End Grill. Oldest daughter Kristy, 32, does the marketing and keeps the books from her home in New Jersey, where she is a marketing vice president of a pharmaceutical firm.

"I wouldn't have done this without full family support," Nancy said. "We did this for the kids to get them into business and we'll be doing this for at least 10 years. We anticipate this is going to be real successful."

"It's a good feeling getting a new business up and running," Steve added.

For Karyn, satisfaction comes from return bookings, especially from business groups that are scheduling regular meetings.

"The greatest feeling is getting positive feedback," she said.

Karyn was the first to move to Florida in 1998 when she enrolled at the Art Institute in West Palm Beach. She later graduated from Florida Atlantic University. Andrew came next in 2001 to also attend and graduate from FAU. Their parents followed.

Retirement and relaxation didn't take for the elder Huszars, however, and they opened the West End Grill on Feb. 7, 2005. The upscale restaurant has grown in popularity, with gross sales rising 36 percent in 2006 from 2005 levels.

"We never expected it to do so well," Nancy said.

The Grill has 90 total seats, half outside with heaters for cold weather. Much to the delight of baseball fanatic Andrew, the Grill has become a favorite of New York Mets players during spring training.

Nancy and Steve credit loyal employees with the success of both the West End Grill and the quick takeoff of the catering business. They still employ 90 percent of the staffers who started with them, which is unusual for restaurants. Most of their 35 employees are also working at the catering operation in their off hours, and the Huszars are beginning to hire outside people.

The family members pride themselves on being more than managers.

On any given night, Nancy or Andrew works on the kitchen line.

"There is nothing in the restaurant we won't do," Nancy said. "One of us is always at the Grill."

"We all mop floors and clean tables," her husband added, laughing.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

January 19, 2007

Waste hauler strives to be as green as its trucks

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Hobe Sound's largest employer may also be its greenest employer. Everyone recognizes Waste Management, Inc.'s big green garbage trucks, but not everyone knows of the company's dedication to a clean environment.

"We implement the best management practices with extensive training for drivers and for all employees," said Senior District Manager Craig Ahal, 38, who has headed the company's Martin County District for 10 years.

All drivers carry a spill kit and they're trained regularly in spill cleanup. All trucks are washed in a self-contained unit at the district headquarters facility on Bridge Road, where the wash water is collected, filtered and recycled.

"We think green, we act green and it's permeated the work force," said Jeff Sabin, district director of public sector services.

"It's part of our internal structure."

Ahal also has implemented the use locally of a bio-fuel to power his 115 trucks with a mixture of 5 percent vegetable oil and 95 percent diesel fuel. This fuel produces less soot and emissions, uses less oil, and recycles a product that would have been wasted.

A Wisconsin native, Ahal learned the business from the bottom up, beginning on the back of a truck 18 years ago. Waste Management paid for his education at Indian River Community College and he worked his way up to the lead local position.

His Martin County district serves Martin, St. Lucie, Okeechobee, Glades and northern Palm Beach counties. The trucks are based at the Bridge Road site for the most part, along with 190 employees, including drivers, mechanics, call center representatives and management.

Ahal's customer service representatives field 1,800 phone calls a week within 15 seconds on average. He said 20 seconds is considered world class, but the company is always trying to improve.

The district's drivers make more than 2.5 million pick-ups a month, and he's proud that on average just 82 are missed.

"If we do our job on the streets, we won't have phone calls," Ahal said.

Drivers and mechanics are paid between \$17 and \$22 an hour. The hiring process is stringent and training includes a two-three week course at the company's Tampa training facility and then daily training each morning at roll call before the trucks move out.

"We're professional drivers," Ahal said. "We need to look out for the other people."

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

July 19, 2007

Becker finds fertile soil in landscaping division

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

When Becker Groves experienced a downturn in its citrus business caused by foreign competition and falling prices, the management team began looking for ways to diversify. They considered businesses which could use their existing people and equipment.

Six years ago, they settled on the wholesale nursery business as a viable option. Today, the nursery on Bridge Road near I-95 has 600 acres of trees in pots.

The next logical step was commercial landscaping, which Becker entered five years ago by purchasing a Delray Beach company and moving it to Bridge Road near the nursery. With its vast experience in watering its own groves, Becker also added irrigation services recently.

Diversification has proven to be a very wise business decision.

The gross revenues have jumped from \$3 million in the year before Becker took over to \$21 million in 2006. Becker Landscaping and Irrigation now contributes 43 percent of the revenues of the Becker Companies.

When Becker took over, the landscaping business had just 14 employees. Today, Landscaping and Irrigation employs 125.

With little landscaping experience, the company hired landscape veteran Charles Parker, as vice president of operations to run the operation. He had worked for Valley Crest Landscaping, the largest in the world, heading up the Florida and Georgia operations while based in Orlando.

Today, Becker Landscaping and Irrigation serves clients from Vero Beach to Miami, including large developers like WCI Communities, M/I Homes and Catafulmo Construction. Current projects include 800 homes at Sand Trail, a Centex development in Palm City, and Old Palm in Palm Beach Gardens. The company is also the landscaper at the new Pine School upper level facility, which will open in Hobe Sound in February.

Parker expects offshore work to make up 40 percent of his business in the near future. The company employs 35 in the Bahamas where the company is working on several major projects, including the Chub Cay Marina and Villas, a \$5.5 million job.

Major competitors include Valley Crest, his old employer, Vila and Sons of Miami, and Concepts in Greenery and Dixie Landscaping of Stuart. Parker said about 65 percent of his company's jobs are negotiated work, however, rather than the result of competitive bidding. He credits strong customer relationships.

He is also high on his employees, and is proud of the company's good salaries, profit sharing, Christmas bonuses, health care and uniforms for workers.

"Half our employees have been offered jobs with other companies, but few leave," Parker said.

Parker is a Hobe Sound resident and is active in the Hobe Sound Chamber of Commerce. The chamber chose Becker Landscape and Irrigation to receive the Martin County Business Development Board Industry Appreciation Award in September.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

January 19, 2007

Firm ready for life outside IRCC incubator

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Karen Schreiner has lost another tenant. She couldn't be happier. Capture Information Services Group, a market research and data collection firm, has grown too big for its space in the Indian River Community College High-Tech Business Incubator and has moved out, which is exactly how it's supposed to work.

Schreiner is the director of the IRCC incubator on SE Central Parkway just off U.S. 1 in Stuart. The incubator provides furnished office suites at competitive lease rates, network computers and complimentary high speed Internet access, use of shared business equipment and facilities, business advice and networking opportunities.

Schreiner said three years is the average stay for a business at the incubator, but Capture ISG made the leap in just 20 months.

FIRM'S BRAINCHILD

The firm is the brainchild of Stuart Marion, 49, who shares ownership with his business partner and wife, Maureen Hamilton. He started the business in Warwick, R.I., in 1991 after getting caught in a layoff at Fidelity Investments, where he was director of a brokerage account. In all, Marion spent 12 years in the financial services industry with stints at Bank of New York and Chemical Bank of New York, in addition to Fidelity.

Marion envisioned Capture ISG as a management consulting firm specializing in service quality programs and call centers. But in 1994, at the request of a client, Marion added a market research program using his existing infrastructure.

Marion's wife also joined the firm in 1994 from her financial services career. Their core of part time employees grew to 10 to 15 workers.

Two years ago, Marion and Hamilton moved to this area to be near his ill mother, now deceased, and his sisters.

Marion heard about the incubator from another satisfied tenant and moved most operations there in April 2005 while scaling back in Rhode Island. He credits Jack Burns, who was then IRCC's small business development center consultant, with helping him learn the local market.

"Coming from a totally different market, this was critical to getting us off on the right foot," Marion said.

He and Hamilton started marketing down here, joined the area chambers of commerce and human resources organizations, and started getting busier through recommendations and word-of mouth. Soon, local clients were added to Capture ISG's other clients around the United States, and the firm's space at the incubator grew from one office suite to four.

"Our hard work started to pay off," Marion said.

Market research continues to be a major offering for Capture ISG. The firm uses computer-aided telephone interviewing, which guides interviewers through each conversation. The firm has also done political polling, surveys of topical issues and member retention surveys for organizations.

THE CLIENTS

With the firm's managers possessing a strong background in financial services, it's no surprise that banks are the largest client segment, along with insurance companies, brokerages and mutual funds. Capture ISG provides market research and assessments of customer service to banks.

The company's client list also includes public relations firms, management consultants, hospitality businesses, service industries and a greeting card company.

Since 2002, Capture ISG's largest client has been Tennessee-based The Work Institute, which calls itself a human capital intelligence firm. It helps companies create better workplaces and become better employers. After serving as an outside vendor to The Work Institute, Marion became an employee three years ago as director of call center research services.

In this role, Marion and Capture ISG conduct telephone interviews to gauge the satisfaction of present employees and to provide exit interviews of former employees. They will soon provide so-called "on-boarding" interviews to ask new employees their impressions of the recruiting and orientation process.

For The Work Institute, Capture ISG extensively study other companies' call center operations. Capture ISG personnel call as customers to evaluate how they are treated by other operators. They evaluate how operators answer the phone, put people on hold, how they transfer calls, their product knowledge,

their selling and cross-selling skills, and how well they tell the customer when to expect resolution or product arrival.

Marion manages all call center operations for the facilities in Stuart, another in New York and possibly a third to be added next year in Tennessee or Wisconsin.

PRAISES SUNG

Local customers sing the praises of Capture ISG. Riverside National Bank asked for a survey of local customers and non-customers to spot trends.

"Capture ISG was able to take the nuances of our research request and produce a product customized to our market," said Scott Williams, Riverside's senior vice president of marketing. "They were able to do the analysis and come back with clear and concise results."

Executive Director Linda Cox of the St. Lucie Chamber of Commerce called upon Capture ISG for a membership survey.

"We had a marvelous experience with the work Stuart and Maureen did for us," Cox said. "They provided us great information we were never able to gather on our own. And, they're both very hard workers, committed to our community."

With no more room to expand from its 600 square feet at the incubator, Capture ISG has moved down the street to the corner of Kanner Highway. Marion and Hamilton now have 850 square feet with options to expand.

"Being at the incubator gave us scalability and the opportunity to expand, and we shared business and friendship with the other tenants," Marion said. "We plan to maintain those relationships even though we've moved."

The feeling is mutual, according to Schreiner.

"They were a wonderful client, always willing to work with the other incubator clients," Schreiner said. "They fit into the family."

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

December 15, 2006

After his experience, PSL man says this bed's for you

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

An aching back with no cure propelled a Port St. Lucie insurance salesman to start a business.

Duncan Macquarrie, 49, designed the Fijibed, which uses infrared heat treatments and heat-conducting, pivoting jade rollers to produce a mechanical massage.

Macquarrie developed sciatica in 2003. The condition often is caused by a herniated disk in the lumbar region of the spine. The pain radiates to the buttocks and to the back of the thigh. When visits to a hospital emergency room and to chiropractors brought no long-term relief, Macquarrie tried a Migun bed, which offers infrared heat and a mechanical deep-tissue massage, but uses fixed balls.

"I could not stand the pain of the first treatment," Macquarrie said.

Though he was told future sessions would take away the pain, Macquarrie began looking for another bed. He had experience importing products from the Asia as the founder of Savannah Trading Co. in 1997. As a nationally certified minority business (Macquarrie's mother was Cuban), Savannah became a vendor to Wal-Mart, providing the chain with underwater diving lights.

"I was probably the smallest vendor in Wal-Mart," says Macquarrie, a Fort Pierce native and graduate of John Carroll High School and Florida Atlantic University.

He found what he was looking for on a trip to Korea: an infrared bed not sold in the United States because it uses 220 volts, rather than the standard 110 volts. He also noticed that Korea mainly was an assembly point. The bed was made in China.

His odyssey for a cure took him to Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, where he found a large manufacturer of massage chairs, commonly found in this country at specialty stores. Company executives agreed to make his bed.

An old friend, electrical engineer Ken Hoffman of Palm City, converted the bed from 220 to 110 volts. Although not a designer, Macquarrie set about remaking the product. He wanted to replace the hard knobs of the other bed he had tried with jade rollers to offer a more gentle massage.

He also changed the color from a choice of black or silver to tan.

"I wanted it to look like a nice piece of furniture," Duncan says.

"It's more a therapeutic massage than a medical treatment and so is more suited to a spa-type setting."

With the design changes completed, manufacturing began late last year.

The Chinese company, which he declined to name for competitive reasons, made 10 beds to start. They quickly sold at a trade show in Kissimmee.

Macquarrie, his girlfriend, Lou Ann Ellison, Hoffman and his wife, Janet, began making the trade show circuit together, concentrating on massage therapists and chiropractors. They've sold 50 beds thus far, at a price of \$2,195 each.

Macquarrie says his Chinese manufacturer could make 300 beds a month and could ramp up further if there's demand. He has a small warehouse in Palm City that can hold about 100 beds.

To help sell the bed, Macquarrie has lined up eight distributors and is looking for more. Included are catalog firms in North Carolina and Arkansas, five small businesses in Orlando, Fort Myers and Plantation, and Port St. Lucie-based Remetronix, a medical equipment transportation and installation firm which is adding Fijibed to its list of supplies.

The Martin County distributor is Linda Houston, owner of Too Social Butterflies, a downtown Jensen Beach restaurant with an eclectic array of other products and services, including an oxygen bar, sauna, tanning, massage, art, jewelry and an Internet cafe.

Houston offers 10-minute free sessions to display the Fijibed. The product draws a lot of interest on Thursday nights when the weekly Jammin' Jensen promotion brings hundreds to the downtown area.

Palm City resident Ed Ruane, who calls himself "more than 65," liked the bed so much that he brought wife, Joanna, back on a recent Thursday evening to get her impression.

"I'm in ecstasy, it's fantastic," she said. "It massages all the way down to my feet."

"It's revolutionary," Ed Ruane said. "I really like that both heat and pressure can be adjusted."

Barbara Lucera, 55, of Jensen Beach, gets regular massages for her back pain, but liked the Fijibed.

"It's almost as good as a human massage," Lucero said.

The bed doesn't appeal only to the older demographic. Cody Ball, a 17-year-old Jensen Beach High School senior, also praised the neck-to-ankles massage.

"It's very comfortable and the rollers don't hurt at all," Ball said.

"It's awesome."

Shop owner Houston, who had herniated discs in her neck, swears by the product.

"Infrared penetrates with radiant heat 1.5 inches into the body, providing a persistent effect," Houston said.

Macquarrie claims the Fijibed offers the combined therapeutic benefits of acupressure, chiropractic, massage and far-infrared heat. That relieves stress and tension in the muscles, improves blood circulation and increases energy.

Chiropractors use infrared radiation to prepare people for chiropractic treatment. It's not for use by pregnant women or people with metal pins from previous surgeries, however.

Macquarrie scoffs at the Korean Ceragem bed gaining some popularity in the South Florida Hispanic community, saying it's very low quality.

"The frame is like lawn furniture, the bed is too short for most Americans, and most importantly, the rollers are fixed, causing pain and an inferior massage experience," Macquarrie says. "Our rollers pivot to follow your spine."

Macquarrie says his biggest challenge is raising awareness of the bed.

He continues to work full time as a salesman for Affirmative Insurance Group's Stuart office as it builds sales and distribution.

"The product is new to the United States. People are not familiar with it," he says. "But I believe in this product 100 percent because I know it can help people."

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

November 3, 2006

Future looks bright for headlight restoration firm

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

What began as a frustration with dim headlights has turned into a business for David Hemby.

He started up more than two years ago because he couldn't clean the cloudy headlights on his Dodge Dakota truck. He tried different restoration kits on the market, with no success.

"There are a bunch of products out there that claim clarity, but I'm in business now because they don't work," Hemby said.

Today, he owns and operates Port St. Lucie-based Klear View Headlight Restoration.

"Many people don't realize that the plastic in headlights breaks down over time and a film develops," Hemby said. "This happens especially with vehicles which are not garaged and sit out in the tough conditions of a seaside area like ours. If you park pointing east or west, the UV rays from the morning or late afternoon sun can also damage your headlight plastic."

"It's a combination of things you don't give much thought to," Hemby said.

Car makers also differ in the kinds of plastics and coatings they use, Hemby adds, producing varying life spans for headlights. He estimates that most will break down to some extent after four to five years.

He was considering buying new headlights, but, with his long experience in automotive repair, he decided to try some ideas of his own. After experimenting with different off-the-shelf products in varying proportions, he finally hit on the right combination.

"I opted for the cheaper products at first, but they failed," Hemby said. "I ruined a few junkyard headlights before I got it right."

Hemby came up with a 10-step process that takes 60 to 90 minutes. He applies a series of specific abrasives in a specific order, follows that with his concoction and finishes with a protective coating.

He makes enough of his product in his garage to last two to three months.

As a part-time assistant manager at Okeechobee Commercial Tire and Service in Okeechobee, Hemby quickly found that many customers had the same problem with their headlights. The store's owners were supportive and allowed him to advertise on their front counter, even encouraging him to build a display and using his service themselves.

Hemby continually made improvements in his process over six months and in the spring of 2005, with a bigger customer base building, Hemby invested in a van and the generator and compressor for polishing and grinding. He's totally mobile.

"I knew I had something," Hemby said.

Today, Hemby works at the tire store part of the week and devotes after hours and off days to his venture. He works by appointment only, and expects to go full time with the headlight restoration business sometime next year.

Hemby charges \$89 to restore two headlights, with an additional \$45 for tail lights and \$89 for the plastic rear windows in convertibles. He gets \$50 minimum to do one headlight, which happens more often than you might think following auto crashes when the insurance company pays for one new headlight to replace one damaged in the collision, leaving an old, filmy headlight that doesn't match.

Hemby compares his prices to those of replacement headlights, which average \$225 for domestic cars and \$350 for foreign models.

Hemby serves Vero Beach to Boca Raton and west to Lake Okeechobee. When he goes full time, he hopes to average five to six jobs a day.

"We didn't expect anything like it," said Bill Anderson, president of B&B Wireless in Port St. Lucie. "My headlights were

pretty fuzzy and the price to replace them at the dealership was quite high.

David's work came out perfectly."

Hemby has done more than 10 vehicles at Praxair Distribution in Okeechobee. Two were company trucks.

"David restored our headlights more than a year ago, and they still look brand new," said driver-supervisor Kenny Christensen.

Dennis Newman said his headlights were yellow when he brought them in for service.

"Hemby buffed them out and they turned clear again, like new,"

said Newman, who , co-owner of Budget Graphics in Port St. Lucie with his wife, Sandy.

As you might expect, Hemby refuses to share the recipe for his mixture or the exact steps in the process for competitive reasons.

"I had a theory and with time and money I perfected it," he said.

Hemby said others have tried to copy his process but they report that their hands hurt and they don't get the same results.

"If you don't do it every day, you can't be as good as a professional," Hemby points out.

A native of Hypoluxo, Hemby learned the automotive business from his late father, a certified mechanic. In his early teens, Hemby got his first automotive job changing tires at Easy Pay Tire in Boynton Beach.

He returned to the tire and automotive repair business after 10 years at Florida Power & Light.

In addition, Hemby has always liked tinkering with his own cars.

This is not Hemby's first entrepreneurial venture. He once founded a window-washing service and then, with his wife of 15 years, Rhonda, he started an automobile detailing service.

Rhonda is a hospice-certified nursing assistant, but recently quit her job to join her husband's business full time as sales director, marketing director, public relations director and anything else he needs done. The couple is very optimistic about the business' potential.

"I hope to franchise someday, but I need to put in the time and prove the numbers," Hemby said. "I'm going to take it one step at a time."

October 6, 2006

Men of steel take on state where concrete is king

BYLINE: **Bill Church** correspondent

The men of steel have arrived on the Treasure Coast construction scene.

Nicholas Peragine and Paul Knafle see what they think is a pent-up demand in this area for cold-rolled, light-gauge steel framing, trusses and wall panels for both commercial and residential construction.

Peragine is chief executive and Knafle chief operating officer of Monarch Co., which recently leased 8,000 square feet on Commerce Avenue in south Stuart.

Their product is from .035 to .073 millimeters thick and is rolled into shapes by a roll-forming machine with no heat. Their nearest competitors are in Miami, Sarasota and Orlando.

"Most builders and developers we've talked to want these products," Peragine said. "We're seeing lots of excitement about steel, and demand outstrips supply in this area."

While Peragine and Knafle would love to build entire structures with light-gauge steel, they are open to supplying just roof trusses, floor trusses and wall panels to contractors who want to marry those with existing building materials like concrete block, concrete and stucco.

"We want to bridge that gap," Peragine says.

Monarch is the only general contractor or steel provider in southeast Florida licensed to use the Aegis Metal Framing system. The product comes roll-formed and Monarch does the design, engineering and fabrication.

Monarch soon will add more customization with new roll-forming technology and machines from Nuconsteel.

With that, Monarch can fabricate wall panels on site. Also on tap is installation of an overhead Virtek TrussLine system, which is tied to a computer and projects a template image onto a work surface for ease of assembly.

As licensed general contractors, Monarch installs its truss and wall products after delivery.

"We want to be a one-stop shop, from vision to fruition," Peragine said.

Peragine and Knafle are moving machinery from their Fort Lauderdale location. They started the process in March with pre-built panels, window frames, door frames and wall systems for eight houses under construction in the Bahamas.

"That job gave us proof of concept," Peragine said. "We proved to investors we knew what we were talking about."

Monarch also supplied the roof trusses for the City Mattress building under construction on U.S. 1 in Jensen Beach. Peragine said the company has signed or completed contracts for residential and commercial projects in South Florida totaling more than \$1.5 million.

Peragine and Knafle see the Treasure Coast commercial truss business as potentially their hottest market, especially in strip malls and restaurants. Combining steel trusses and drywall puts those buildings in a different fire code category, meaning the developer may not need sprinkler systems and might pay lower insurance premiums. Steel can span greater distances than wood trusses and can be designed to withstand winds of 160 mph, they said.

Because Monarch fabricates and assembles products at its indoor facility, the company can speed construction for commercial and residential clients.

"While the slab or foundation is being done, we can simultaneously produce and assemble the truss and wall systems on our assembly line," Knafle said. "We keep better control of costs and weather is not a factor. Workers and superintendents are not standing around at the job site waiting for concrete blocks to be delivered and block mason crews to arrive."

As a result, contractors can shave 20 percent off residential construction time.

Another attraction, important to a growing number of customers and contractors, who want to "build green," is that steel is renewable and 99 percent of the metal that Monarch uses is recycled.

Peragine added he hasn't seen price fluctuations in recycled steel that have occurred in the heavy-gauge steel industry.

"Steel is extremely cost competitive with other materials," he said. "Steel trusses are about 5 percent more expensive than wood, and interior and exterior wall systems are virtually the same in price."

Gopal Ahluwalia, staff vice president of research of the Washington D.C.-based National Association of Home Builders, said costs are different at the national level.

"While Florida uses more concrete and the price differential with steel is not as great, nationally we find steel to be 20 percent more expensive than wood," Ahluwalia said. "Wood still dominates, with steel having just 1 percent of the market."

Steel is turning out to be more cost-effective for the commercial market because buildings can be built higher -- up to nine stories, said Maribeth Rizzuto, director of training and education for the Washington D.C.-based Steel Framing Alliance.

"Despite the higher initial costs, the back-end savings more than compensate and bring a lower total cost," Rizzuto said. "Contractors and customers experience lower maintenance costs, shorter construction times and less material for equal-sized buildings."

Are Peragine and Knafle on to something or are they making a mistake in this area where concrete is king? Ken Ringe, current chairman of the Florida Home Builders Association Commercial Builders Council and past president of the Treasure Coast Builders Association, said Monarch's pioneering concept can overcome the past perceptions of concrete's dominance.

"They've taken the benefits of metal studs and added engineering," Ringe says. "They can take a building plan, put it into a machine, deliver the final product to a job site, and have it erected in a short period of time."

Cold-formed steel construction has been more popular in coastal areas because of its ability to withstand high winds and earthquakes, according to Rizzuto of the Steel Framing Alliance. She said the use of steel now is spreading inland.

"Steel is more durable and will not crack, split or creep," she said. "All of the connections are done mechanically with screws, providing good holding power compared to wood and nails, which can pull apart."

The past four years have brought great growth in the commercial market, Rizzuto said, especially in buildings like assisted-living facilities, which must be non-combustible.

Peragine and Knafle are confident enough in the near future to begin recruiting for what could be a 35-person work force before year end. They anticipate needing installers and assemblers.

The two also like their chances of landing a residential project in Indiantown that would include 46 affordable houses. If they can reach final agreement, Monarch would provide the shells, including slabs, interior and exterior walls and roof trusses.

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

September 1, 2006

BioTools brings biotech innovation to area

BYLINE: Bill Church correspondent

For evidence of the importance of attracting the Scripps Research Institute and possibly Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies to the Treasure Coast, look no further than BioTools Inc.

A small, but fast-growing, company which moved its headquarters in late August to newly-refurbished quarters on Beeline Highway in Jupiter from its original home in north suburban Chicago. The company makes innovative instruments, which shine light at molecules to identify their structure. This information is key for pharmaceutical manufacturers to ensure the exact structure of their products, what effects they will have on the body and what side effects they might produce.

BioTools is now in Florida because the company's co-founder, president and chief executive, Rina Dukor, was chairing a 2003 conference of the General Federation of Analytical Chemistry and Spectroscopy in Fort Lauderdale. On the conference's last day, the news broke that Florida had landed Scripps Research Institute.

"A couple of my customers said, 'Rina, you should move to Florida,'" Dukor recalled. "I was intrigued and began to follow the Scripps saga. I knew we needed to be near a biotech cluster, I felt Scripps could be the beginning of one here, and so I decided, 'Why not Florida?'"

Her father and mother helped out by agreeing to move to Florida with Dukor and her two young children, and buy and renovate the 6,000 square foot vacant commercial building as the new home of BioTools, Inc.

The Business Development Board of Palm Beach County has helped Dukor get established, meet local leaders and find potential employees.

"Being here has raised Biotoools' profile," said Andrew Duffell, the Business Development Board's senior vice president for development.

The company has collaborated with several local companies, developed ties with Florida Atlantic University and become even more successful, Duffell said.

It's been a two-way street.

"Rina is a very strong advocate for the growth of the life science industry in Palm Beach County," Duffell said. "She also is attempting to teach government officials what they need to do to attract life science companies and the importance of having these companies in our local area."

One of those lessons from Dukor is that Scripps is not enough. Local government must provide the necessary incentives to attract

another major research institution and a number of small biotech companies and scientists,

"One company makes another company," Dukor said. "We must show the world that there will be a cluster for scientific people to work together, and to provide jobs for dual career scientific couples."

Areas like California, New Jersey and the Carolina Research Triangle work is because of the cluster that has been created, Dukor said. She predicts a five-to-10-year period for the life sciences to succeed here.

Because Dukor thinks Business Development Board officials are devoted to the biotech recruitment cause, she has attended major biotech meetings with them to sell other companies on the region.

Another goal in moving the company to Florida was to combine its far-flung operations in one place. Currently, BioTools manufactures machines in-house and at subcontractor plants in Illinois, Syracuse, N.Y., and Quebec, Canada. Dukor hopes to bring all manufacturing in-house on Beeline Highway and employ 10 people as soon as possible, depending on sales growth. She is predicting sales of \$1.5 million this year.

The chief scientist for one of BioTool's product lines has already moved to Florida along with a technician. Dukor has hired another key scientist to start this fall and is looking for another technician and a chief financial officer for the Jupiter headquarters. Only sales and marketing will remain in Illinois.

The company's co-founder and chief researcher, Laurence A. Nafie, is a professor at Syracuse University's department of chemistry.

The company is best known for bringing to market the first and only Vibrational Circular Dichroism instrument to determine the true form of chiral drugs, so-named because their molecules have the same chemical structure, but with left and right-handed forms.

The chiral drug industry began in earnest in the mid-1990s and such drugs are now the most prevalent pharmaceuticals. Seven of the 10 so-called "blockbuster" drugs are chiral.

"Think of chiral molecules in terms of a hand and a glove, with the correct glove needing to go on the correct hand," Dukor said. "If the molecule doesn't fit well it could cause side-effects, have the wrong effects, or even kill. An example is thalidomide, which caused many thousands of birth defects when taken by pregnant mothers in the 1950s and '60s."

Pharmaceutical companies must provide this information to federal regulators and must know early on that they are correctly making the drugs.

Several companies, including Brooker of Germany and Thermo of Madison, Wis., have begun reproducing BioTool's instruments and

have replicated some parts of them. BioTools retains 90 percent of this market, however.

"We have a very loyal customer base," Dukor said. "We're known for helping customers know how to get the most out of the product and apply that knowledge to their own particular research. My partner and I are known as the leading experts in this field, and our competition can't match that."

A second key product line, unique to BioTools, is the Raman Optical Activity spectrometer, which looks at the structure of proteins and is the only instrument to tell the structure of viruses. This instrument won the prestigious R&D 100 award from R&D Magazine and has earned the company a \$750,000 Department of Defense grant.

BioTools owns all of this market.

Reaching top positions in the biotech world has not been easy for Dukor. In 1980, she emigrated with her family from Russia at the age of 15. She graduated from an inner-city Chicago high school, and earned bachelor, master and doctorate degrees in chemistry from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1990.

Although she scored well on the admissions test for medical school, she fell in love with her university research, delivered a 250-page thesis and decided to make scientific study her career.

Dukor did research work at an Amoco lab in suburban Chicago, but learned early on there was no machine on the market like the one she and her professor developed and used in school.

She decided to build one herself. Although her professor had no interest in pursuing commercial development, his colleague at Syracuse, Nafie, the best known person in the field, was enthusiastic.

BioTools was born on New Year's Eve 2001 after Dukor, like many entrepreneurs, sold her house, maxed out her credit card and sought family help.

The company has increased revenues at rate of 20 percent per year since then, Dukor said.

The growth has been personally rewarding.

Financially, too. Last year she felt confident enough to begin paying herself a salary.

July 21, 2006

Marine contractors continue strong business despite heavy regulation

BYLINE: **Bill Church** correspondent

Ask established marine contractors about their biggest headaches in building docks and sea walls and you'll get two answers: Red tape and crooked competitors. Despite those problems, local builders say their business is good and shows no signs of weakening.

The construction of docks and sea walls is one of the most heavily regulated businesses in Florida. Various state, federal and local agencies protect the manatees, save the seagrass, ensure that proper materials are used and guarantee that workers are properly insured.

Those all are laudable aims, say state and Treasure Coast contractors, but government rules add time and money to each project.

The manatee protection plan and environmental regulations, for example, severely limit the number of slips that can be built in a marina, based on a ratio of slips to shoreline footage. If tied to construction of a condominium, regulations call for one boat slip for each unit. As a result, fewer private marinas are being built, except at condo sites, according to Steven Webster, executive director of the Florida Marine Contractors Association.

For homeowners wanting to build single docks, Webster points to greatly increased time and costs associated with the regulations.

"What we have done in the state of Florida, with good intentions and bad results, is create a system where honest contractors meet all the permitting requirements, while less scrupulous dock builders skip the permit because the process is punitive and fraught with delay," Webster said.

The permit process can involve the Florida Department of Environmental Resources, the Army Corps of Engineers, state and federal fish and wildlife agencies, the local water management district and the local municipality for a building permit. According to Webster and most contractors, the process can take six to nine months, so many homeowners go with a company that promises to put up a dock immediately.

Worker insurance is another major issue for contractors, said Jay Connors, president of MRMC Construction Inc. and Pelican Pete's Marine Construction Inc. in Vero Beach. Federal law requires any

contractor working over navigable waters to have longshoreman's insurance, originally designed for companies building big docks for oceangoing vessels. Connors' workers build only small docks over two to three feet of water.

"If you fall off our docks, you just stand up," Connors laughed. "Nevertheless, we comply with the law and buy this very expensive insurance, while many unscrupulous contractors don't. With their much lower costs, it's a non-level playing field."

Despite these obstacles, most Florida and Treasure Coast dock building companies report strong business. The Florida Marine Contractors Association estimates dock and seawall building in Florida is a \$1.3 billion industry based on its surveys. Webster said Treasure Coast marine contractors are ahead of the statewide 10 to 12 percent annual growth rates because of the heavy storm damage here combined with the influx of residents.

Connors, for example, bought Pelican Pete's in 2003 and MRMC in 2004. He reports three to four times as much dollar volume for Pelican Pete's and twice as much for MRMC since his purchase. Among other things, he credits greatly increased repair and reconstruction work generated by the hurricanes.

Unlike Connors' Indian River County business, which serves mainly the residential market, 90 percent of Stuart-based Custom Built Marine's business is in the commercial market. In business more than 18 years, Custom Built offers services including engineering, planning and concrete and steel sheet piling work, in addition to the traditional dock building and sea wall construction.

Ray Corrigan said he and his brother, David, started with a pickup truck and a station wagon. "We grossed about \$100,000 the first year, but last (jump page missing)

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

July 7, 2006

Organic Foods Special Report

Store owners: It costs more, but no shortage of buyers

BYLINE: Bill Church correspondent

Rick Noble and Gary Hyatt sell groceries the old-fashioned way. They have a loyal customer base that comes back week after week. They provide personal service around their neighborhood store, holding baskets for customers who need such help and carrying groceries to the car. If a customer requests a product, they get it in, causing customers to say, "I can't believe they listened to me." And they do all this with a very important twist -- almost all of their stock is organic.

"We're the only organic grocery in the area," said Noble, co-owner of Florida Organic on Dixie Highway in Rio. "Some health stores sell some organic groceries, but pills are their main business."

"We buy only from accredited certified organic farmers," Hyatt said. "We buy local when we can and from Florida distributors if we can. There are not a lot of organic growers in this area, and of course some things don't grow in Florida."

Their clientele comes from as far away as Palm Beach, passing up the Whole Foods store in Palm Beach Gardens. Whole Foods made its name selling organic, but now it's a trendy national chain with organic and non-organic food, Noble and Hyatt said. Wal-Mart also sells organic products. Now, organic is getting lots of media attention, which is good for Florida Organic.

"True organic lovers don't trust the big stores," Noble said.

"Our customers are fanatics about this, and the more people know, the better we look," Hyatt said.

Noble and Hyatt estimate that health care professionals and their patients make up 30 percent of their business. Oncologists tell their cancer patients to stop putting pesticides in their bodies, because their immune systems are weak from chemotherapy.

The organic grocers didn't start out to found a store. Noble read a magazine article about an organic grocery delivery business in Oregon and sold Hyatt on the idea. In October 2003, they made their first delivery out of Noble's garage in Port St. Lucie after distributing fliers through the neighborhoods. They made 10 deliveries the first week.

In January 2004, they started an online store, which still makes up 30 percent of the business and has good growth prospects for adding delivery areas. Total deliveries have gone to 300 customers, but Hyatt describes the delivery business as a "roller coaster" based on the season.

The Web site, www.floridaorganic.net, has about half of the products found in the store. They deliver to Martin, St. Lucie and Palm Beach counties. Even with the current high gasoline prices, delivery is free with a \$40 minimum purchase.

"If a customer has an 'organic emergency,' we'll deliver on demand for a \$5 fee," Noble said.

In June 2004, the pair started selling produce a few doors from their present location and in July 2005, they moved into a storefront where Hyatt once managed an air-conditioning company. They laid tile, moved walls, built the cooler and Hyatt painted the murals.

"It was only going to be a delivery business," Noble said. "We just went where our customers took us."

Organic products cost more, but Florida Organic's customer base of 80 per week -- 160 to 180 in season -- keep coming back.

"Our customers have made a choice to eat healthy, knowing they will have to pay more," Noble said. "They relax in here and they feel and look better."

"These are good down-to-earth people," Hyatt said. "We've had just one bounced check in almost three years in business. They want us to succeed."

Noble and Hyatt's said they want to add wholesale, filling a niche for restaurants, country clubs, catering services, medical facilities and, especially, schools.

"With the current plague of childhood obesity, you could do some good in the world by providing schools healthy organic foods," Noble said.

They will need funding to do that, but they are dedicated to succeeding where they are.

"We've taken baby steps," Hyatt said. "We don't have a sheepskin on the wall, so for now we have to prove the business is profitable and show that it will work."

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TREASURE COAST
Business Journal

July 7, 2006

Restaurants and suppliers share symbiotic relationship

BYLINE: **Bill Church** correspondent

The Treasure Coast is not exactly overflowing with restaurants serving organic food. For devotees of healthy eating, however, downtown Jensen Beach has become the place for organic dining, with two very different restaurants attracting attention. And their hours don't even overlap.

For breakfast and lunch, the new Nanakai's Cottage Cafe has been turning out all-organic and all-vegetarian dishes since January. For dinner, the 20-year-old 11 Maple Street continues to serve award-winning dishes made with ingredients that are more than 60 percent organic.

When the Colleys moved to Rio last year, John said he planned to renew his Maryland-based landscaping and gardening business. But the couple, both vegetarians, , also had a dream of opening a restaurant, patterned after one in Debbi Colley's hometown, Pittsburgh.

By coincidence, John Colley happened to be driving by one day at the exact time the owner of a little Pineapple Street restaurant was moving out. They struck a deal, brightened up the building, redid the air-conditioning and found themselves in the restaurant business.

Although the restaurant's name sounds Hawaiian, it actually comes from the names the Colley's two little girls call each other. Damiana, 4, has become Nana and Kaya, 3, is Kai.

John Colley had owned a Mexican carry-out restaurant in Ocean City and worked at other eating establishments. Debbi Colley was a beauty salon owner before their marriage. Like many vegetarians, both are self-taught cooks who studied extensively and learned at events like the Vegetarian Summerfest in Asheville, N.C.

Nanakai's menu is vegetarian and vegan. Vegetarians can use dairy products, but can't eat meat. Vegans cannot use any animal byproducts, including dairy. All breads and baked goods are vegan. Some dishes can be done either way upon request. Debbi and John Colley even use organic soaps and dishwashing liquids in the kitchen.

Many of their supplies come from the nearby Florida Organic grocery store in Rio. Both businesses benefit by building up the organic trade, according to John Colley.

The Colleys switch roles between cooking and serving. Although they occasionally employ part-time help, they say one of them always will be in the kitchen to maintain their high standards.

"It comes from our heart and our soul," Debbi Colley said. "If that ends, it means we've gotten too big."

She estimated that eighty percent of their customers are not vegetarians, but come for the good and good-for-you food. They get people with health problems, cancer patients, diabetics, and those on gluten-free and casein-free diets. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. Casein is an ingredient in dairy products.

According to John Colley, it's more than the food that attracts customers.

"People come here and relax," John Colley said. "People who don't know each other start talking. That's why we started our Friday night dinners with music, art, guest speakers and lots of interaction."

After six months, the Colleys already are branching out. The Bridges Montessori School in Stuart has asked him to plant an organic garden and help teach students. John and Debbi Colley also are redesigning the school menu to introduce healthier foods. They host private parties by reservation, prepare private meals for pickup or delivery, offer cooking classes, provide food to vegetarian retreats and soon will supply a new organic coffeehouse in Port St. Lucie.

As with any new business, the restaurant has its slow times, but Sunday brunch and Friday evenings have been very busy.

"We are all-organic because our customers expect it," Debbi Colley said. "It's hard financially because organic food does cost more. Some customers have even expressed interest in investing in the restaurant to help the movement."

Echoing most other entrepreneurs in the organic business, Colley said that she and her husband are not out for a quick buck.

"All we can do is try," Debbi Colley said. "We're in business for a purposeful reason, to give to our customers. Hopefully, that gift will be given back to us."

While John and Debbi Colley continue to build their new business, just down the street is one of the most successful and highly regarded restaurants on the Treasure Coast. Owner and chef Mike Perrin uses as many organic ingredients as he can while staying competitive as a full-service restaurant.

"We bomb the earth with way too many chemicals," Perrin said. "When I garden I use safer plant derivatives to fight bugs, but no chemicals."

Perrin said he was inspired by Alice Waters' famed Chez Panise in San Francisco, which emphasizes organically grown and freshly harvested products. He buys from a large organic-food supplier in Sarasota when prices are reasonable, leaving organic alone when prices go up based on weather and other concerns. He also tries for organically raised meat.

"I'm an animal-lover," Perrin said. "I only serve wild salmon, I don't serve foie gras and I don't serve lamb -- they're too cute."

Animal rights organizations regard the production method for foie gras as cruel, because birds are force-fed.

Perrin says he can't change his menu prices every day, but he does have some leeway, especially when organic products are not that much more expensive.

"Restaurants like mine are chef-oriented and ingredient-driven," Perrin said. "Unfortunately too many restaurants are dollar-driven."

Perrin's formula is successful. 11 Maple has expanded from its original 30 to 40 seats to 80. He's worked hard at it, however, never missing a night in the restaurant's 20 years.

Perrin has good news for organic-food lovers. He's working on ideas for a future all-organic restaurant in this area. He would hire a chef for the new establishment, with Perrin contributing recipes and quality control.

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July 7, 2006

Organic not the same as naturally grown produce

BYLINE: Bill Church correspondent

Dedication. A strong, but giving spirit. A shortage of cash. That's the universal job description of the organic farmer.

Those who make the rounds of local green markets often run into Sal and Holly Varri, the young owners of Varri Green Farm, or Brenda and Jim Gibbons, of Gibbons Organic Farm in Fort Pierce. They are all friends and support each others' work. And they are passionate about the federal National Organic Program.

The Gibbons operate a "certified organic" farm on two acres of leased St. Lucie County land on King's Highway. Sal and Holly Varri's farm is a "certified naturally grown" facility on a 20-acre operation close by the shore of Lake Okeechobee.

What's the difference?

The National Organic Program is a Department of Agriculture entity created in 2002 in an attempt to assure consumers that organic products meet consistent, uniform standards. Organic products are certified by an independent third party licensed by the USDA to inspect crops in groves and fields, and meat from packing plant to market.

Growers may not use chemical pesticides harmful to humans because residual amounts remain in the body. Nor can growers use synthetic fertilizers. Fields must be free of such pollutants for

three years before organic crops can be planted. Growers must also use organic seeds and practice crop rotation.

Organic meats can come only from animals that have not been fed other animal meat. The program requires regular inspections by government, private or not-for-profit organizations which meet strict USDA certification guidelines.

The Certified Naturally Grown program is a non-profit alternative certification program tailored for small-scale, direct-to-market organic farmers. The CNG Web site says its certification standards include, but are not limited to, USDA organic standards. Inspectors include personnel from county extension services and the University of Florida Institute for Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Brenda Gibbons strongly disapproves of the Certified Naturally Grown program, claiming it "muddies the water" for the consumer. She's dubious about the quality of the inspections.

"Who's keeping the records on the CNG?" she said.

Sal Varri disagrees, claiming he doesn't need a USDA stamp to guarantee his products are truly organic.

"None of our customers care," Varri said. "Our customers can tell from the way we talk that we know what we're doing. We even hold farm tours so our customers can inspect us for themselves."

Varri also feels the government program doesn't guarantee a grower is following the rules. He said anyone can start using pesticides or fertilizers the day after the inspector leaves and no one will be the wiser. He calls for random testing several times a year.

"My personal feelings are when you involve the government you end up with a lot of red tape and paperwork," Varri said.

Despite their differences, the Varris and the Gibbons are advocates for each other's work.

"It's great to have local farming, whatever the designation," Brenda Gibbons said. "I just want consumers to understand the difference."

"I love Brenda and support everything she does," Sal Varri said. "The National Organic Program is just not right for us."

GROWING AN ORGANIC FARM

The Gibbons began their farm in 2000, growing year round by using greenhouses with raised beds on one of their two acres. They produce a variety of produce, including tomatoes, tropical long beans, herbs, lettuce and cucumbers. They sell at the Fort Pierce and Vero Beach green markets and to stores. They've also supplied the Today Show and Food Network.

The nine greenhouses give some control over the weather, but not hurricanes, which hit Gibbons Farm hard. Large trees came down on the greenhouses. The Gibbons are growing in three of the nine

houses, and expect to be back at full production by the end of the year. They also raise goats, chickens, rabbits and cats.

Brenda Gibbons adds to the family income by working as a nurse at Longwood Regional Hospital in Fort Pierce.

With no greenhouses, Sal and Holly Varri manage to grow a variety of crops from October through May. They have 15 varieties of lettuce, five kinds of carrots, lots of greens, radishes and herbs. They can't grow in the summer because the Florida bugs and heat kill much of the crops, and, following organic farming principles, the Varris won't spray with pesticides.

They've also planted fruit trees, like apple, peach, pear, plum, nectarine, and fig -- fruits not normally seen on the Treasure Coast. The harvest should be ready in two or three years. Tropical and sub-tropical fruit trees also dot the landscape, but they won't produce for five to six years.

"We want to make money, but money isn't everything," Sal Varri said. "It's just as important that we protect the environment and reduce pollution. We're tree huggers."

Sal Varri's real estate investments help support the couple while they build the organic farm business. Varri bought the property where the farm now stands in 1993. He has had attractive offers to sell, but Varri and his wife say they are dedicated to protecting the small family farm and preserving the natural environment.

The Varris will continue to sell at green markets and they plan a roadside fruit stand across the road in a former cattle weight station. Expected to be ready in October, the stand will operate on the honor system, with available produce listed on the farm's Web site (www.varrigreenfarm.com).

ORGANIC VS. NATURALLY GROWN PRODUCTS

Organic: Farms must meet standards of the Department of Agriculture's national organic program. Growers may not use chemical pesticides or synthetic fertilizers. Fields must be free of those pollutants before organic crops can be grown. Growers must use organic seeds and practice crop rotation. The program requires regular inspections by entities that meet the USDA's certification guidelines.

Naturally grown: The Certified Naturally Grown program is a nonprofit alternative certification method geared towards small-scale, direct-to-market organic farms. Its certification standards include USDA organic standards among other procedures. Inspectors can be anyone from county officials to university agricultural specialists.

June 16, 2006

Beat goes on at medical equipment installer, transporter

BYLINE: **Bill Church** correspondent

When the Belfor USA subsidiary he managed was about to be sold in 2000, Russell J. Knowles faced a decision. He could allow St. Lucie West-based Remetronix to possibly disband, throwing its 20 employees out of work, or he could continue to lead his team as the company's new owner.

"On behalf of the employees, I felt an obligation to continue to lead," Knowles said.

Joining with veteran installer and information specialist Nick Giallanzo as partner, Knowles bought the company, a specialized medical imaging equipment transportation and installation organization. Six years later, the privately held firm now employs 125 professionals stationed around the country in three different companies and has racked up year-over-year growth of 10 percent.

This year has been outstanding thus far, according to Knowles, with close to 3,000 assignments compared to 2,500 last year.

Remetronix is the largest company in a niche, but very important, business. The firm serves nine of the top 10 original imaging equipment manufacturers by transporting large medical imaging and nuclear medicine equipment to customer sites, like hospitals and other medical facilities. The company puts into operation magnetic resonance imaging machines, computed tomography equipment, positron emission tomography nuclear medicine equipment and machines for cardiovascular labs.

Remetronix employees use a forklift or crane to lift the equipment into the building, assemble it, hook up all the cable, connections and computers, and then normally turn it over to the manufacturer's techs for calibration. Remetronix employees are now being trained in calibration so that the company can provide turnkey service.

This medical equipment logistics business was born in the early 1990s when manufacturers decided it would be more cost-effective to outsource the work than to use their engineers to pull cables and install equipment.

Knowles worked for Siemens Medical Solutions USA, a major medical equipment manufacturer, for 16 years. In 1993, he requested a transfer to the Treasure Coast for family reasons. He stayed with

the Remetronix subsidiary when it was sold to Belfor USA, then bought it in 2000.

Today, Remetronix operates from an 8,000-square-foot building in St. Lucie West, built two years ago to the company's specifications. More than 25 professionals coordinate, schedule and dispatch technicians from that location, and the facility houses such back-office functions as accounting and human resources.

Remetronix works closely with Indian River Community College, using state grants to provide training for employees. IRCC even helps out by sending instructors to the company facility.

"We've been fortunate in recruiting professional people," Knowles said. "If they lack some skills, IRCC trains them."

In addition to Remetronix, Knowles created two sister companies. He founded Techmed Solutions in 2002 in response to requests from customers in the highly competitive original imaging equipment manufacturing industry. They wanted a different company than the one serving their competitors.

"It seemed important to them then, but now they could care less," Knowles laughs. "Ironically, Techmed has now become an important, well-branded company in its own right."

In 2003, Knowles started a trucking subsidiary, Med-Trans Logistics. For all three companies, Knowles is president and chief executive and handles business development while Giallanzo is vice president and chief operating officer, managing field and day-to-day operations.

The three companies operate in the United States and Canada, Ireland and Indonesia. Customers include industry giants Siemens Medical Solutions USA, General Electric Health Care, Fuji Film Medical Systems and Hologic.

"We use Remetronix personnel because they are expert assemblers and riggers of large and difficult-to-install image equipment," said Gonzalo Diaz, vice president of operations for Miami-based Med-Lab Supply Company, the agent for Siemens in the 10 counties of South Florida. "They do more of that specialized work around the country than anyone else."

Working mainly for insurance companies, Remetronix also provides disaster recovery services. With its specialized skill, the company can decontaminate, repair and clean this very expensive imaging equipment in a matter of days following a fire, flood or some other catastrophe in a hospital. The company's specialists continue to consult for several New Orleans medical facilities which suffered severe water damage during Katrina last year.

Not only does this service generally cost just 10 percent of the replacement expense, it gets the revenue-producing imaging equipment back in service in a matter of days.

Remetronix is branching out, having just inked a deal with Vero Beach-based XStream Systems to distribute that company's new

patented X-ray system for materials identification. The device allows law enforcement organizations to identify drugs and pharmaceutical manufacturers to confirm the materials in their products. The equipment is being considered for possible use in homeland security.

According to Knowles, XStream's product is more compact, fast and affordable than other equipment currently on the market.

"Based on the evolution of our company we continue to expand upon our service offerings in other areas," Knowles said. "Within the past year, we have begun doing more trouble shooting and on site support for customers, and I envision we will be offering more project management services in the near future."

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