

W'bago Manufacturing stands out as Business of the Year

By JILL ROESLER
Register Staff Writer

For many Faribault County residents, it is easy to overlook the sprawling Industrial Park that lies west of Blue Earth, just north of County Road 16.

Perhaps that is because the Industrial Park has been part of the city for so many years that the unique goods and services that are manufactured there can sometimes be forgotten by long-time city residents.

But this year, one of the companies that is located among the vast array of machine sheds and buildings stands out as Blue Earth's Business of the Year, an award passed out only once per year by the Blue Earth Chamber.

Daryle Pomranke is the sole owner of Winnebago Manufacturing, Inc., the company that was deemed the "best business" in Blue Earth for 2014.

Alongside his wife Connie and their son, Matt, the Pomranke's have seen exponential growth in their business and in the satisfaction of their employees.

Daryle Pomranke purchased one-third of the manufacturing company in 1999. He shared ownership with his partner, Bob Preston, and another third-party investor until 2004, when Preston and Pomranke purchased the silent partner's share.

Eight years later, Pomranke bought Preston's half and he became the sole owner of the 62-year-old company.

"Sole ownership enables you to make quicker decisions," Pomranke says. "I'm able to self-direct the company based on a personal vision, and I can make consistent decisions in order to prepare a succession plan for the future."

The future of Winnebago Manufacturing will not veer too far off the path that it is currently on, Pomranke explains; rather, he acknowledges that the company is most efficient with original equipment manufacturing, or OEM.

"We don't want to venture off of being a job shop," he says.

There is a wide variety



Staff photos by Jill Roesler

Winnebago Manufacturing, located in the Blue Earth Industrial Park, has been named the 2014 Blue Earth Business of the Year. Bottom left, left to right, Connie, Matt and Daryle Pomranke have owned the company since 2012.

The company uses heavy plate rolling to produce slabs of metal that are tougher than the rest and that have precise thickness and measurements.

"We try to buy equipment that keeps us unique in the area," says Pomranke.

The company has also invested in a new stress release oven, a machine that heats the metal to a temperature just below the transformation temperature in order to release stress induced by welding.

"We make it our goal to be aware of new technology," says Pomranke, who now has 42 full-time workers and three part-timers on the payroll. "We frequently update and practice our procedures so that

our employees stay up-to-date and safe."

The manufacturing company has seen a retention rate of 94 percent among employees over the past few years.

When it comes to the employees' satisfaction, Pomranke gives credit to the new \$100,000 lunchroom, in which local businesses contributed to the renovation, and the half-million dollar update to the plant itself.

"We make it our goal

that the employees are proud of where they work," says Connie.

However, some of the employees argue that it is the way that the company is managed that has kept them around for so long.

"It's nice to have a single proprietor," says Mark Hinz, the company's plant manager. "I can really relate to what one guy says. These guys have been really great to us."

The Pomrankes have also put the employees on their Lean Team committee.

"The Lean Team has been able to implement new technologies; they are basically simplifying a process," says Matt.

For example, the Lean Team is currently trying to figure out how to bring the welding station and the heavy plate roller closer together without disrupting the flow of the plant.

"We ask them to be part of the team because they're the ones who are out there all day," Matt adds. "It's a lot less likely to fail because they're the ones who implement it."

As for the future of Winnebago Manufacturing, Pomranke wants to continue to find simplified solutions to any issues that arise within the plant.

They are not looking at taking on a new trade, but rather improve and advance the employees' skills as technology evolves.

"We're going to continue to invest in the equipment and in the employees," Pomranke says. "We just want to get better at what we do."

of goods manufactured in the plant for companies such as Caterpillar, Emerson Electric, Surestrike and Jarraff.

The employees spend each day building the framework or parts of a larger mechanism for items such as rock crushers, excavation equipment, fire truck bodies and boom trucks, large and small generators and even industrial sized laundry equipment.

"When we get the plan, it's all been engineered and tested and we just get to build it," says Matt, the general manager of the company. "It's really a lot of fun; the guys enjoy the variety of product that comes in for us to produce."

One of the procedures that makes Winnebago Manufacturing stand out among all other manufacturing companies is the unprecedented techniques and equipment.



Staff photos by Jill Roesler

Daryle Pomranke, far right, took over as the sole owner of Winnebago Manufacturing, Inc. in 2012. His wife Connie, far left, left her job as a teacher in Mankato to become Daryle's administrative assistant once he became the owner, while their son Matt, middle, serves as the general manager for the company. At right, one of the welders works on a piece of rolled metal that will be part of a generator. Rolled metal is the business' specialty.

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