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A stamp of quality marks this modest exec

CEO Kenneth McAlpin's vision of quality and community service earns him small-business accolades

By DEBBIE WALTZER

When Kenneth McAlpin asked his best friend to join him on a grocery shopping trip to pick up a few things for his wife, Steven DeBusk did not think twice.

But as the two meandered through the aisles at BJ's Wholesale Club, DeBusk, whose career as a master carpenter had abruptly ended a few months earlier from a debilitating spinal cord injury, noticed McAlpin was loading the shopping cart with more than just a few items.

McAlpin, president and CEO of McAlpin Industries Inc. and DeBusk's best buddy for some 30 years, since their freshman year at Bishop Kearney High School, started grabbing cans of vegetables and soups off the shelves as well as meats, paper products and other household goods.

Before long, the cart was overflowing and DeBusk figured out what was going on.

"Ken was buying those things for me, and refused to accept a penny from me," says DeBusk, a former Navy SEAL. "I have never met a finer man in my life."

McAlpin's generosity, compassion, business leadership skills and commitment to community causes all contributed to his selection last month as Small-Business Person of the Year, says Mary Anderson, co-chairperson of the event and incoming president of the Small Business Council of the Greater Rochester Metro Chamber of Commerce Inc.

Occupying 140,000 square feet of manufacturing and office space on Hollenbeck Street on the city's north side, McAlpin Industries Inc. is a precision sheet metal fabricating and metal stamping firm. The company expects to log \$22 million to \$25 million in sales this year. Over the last five years, the company has enjoyed 10 percent to 20 percent annual revenue growth, and employment has grown 3 to 5 percent.

"I'll never forget the look on Ken's face when his name was announced," recalls Anderson, CEO of Aurora Group LLP, a financial planning firm. "He was absolutely stunned and choked up, with tears in his eyes."

No one seated in the Rochester Riverside Convention Center that day—except two staff members from the accounting firm that tallied the 400 member votes—knew which of the seven finalists won.

"I can understand why he won the vote. There is not a shred of pompousness in Ken's soul and he is extremely modest," Anderson says. "I am told he's the kind of boss who makes people want to come back to work for him day in and day out."

The award caught McAlpin off-guard.

"I'm not a flashy kind of guy, and I'm much more comfortable with achievements that recognize our entire company team, such as when we earned ISO-9002 and QS-9000 certifications," he says. "Still, I'm extremely humbled and honored by this award."

McAlpin, 45, also is far more comfort-



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

McAlpin: "If you asked me to build a die, I couldn't do it. But I hire people who can, and I'm never threatened by people who know more than I do."

able redirecting the conversation to his metal-processing company's 230 employees, who "daily make miracles for our customers."

"Our people work so hard, and hustle to meet our customers' needs," he says. "When a custom product is needed fast, they step up to the challenge and just do it."

The company was founded in 1964 as a tool-and-die shop by his father Frank McAlpin and Ralph Derleth. The pair bought German Tool & Die and ran both companies. Derleth retired in 1981. Frank McAlpin retired from McAlpin Industries Inc. in 1992. He renamed his second company German Machine Inc. in 1997, and continues as its CEO.

McAlpin Industries today provides precision sheet metal fabricating and metal stamping for some 100 customers in the high-tech and automotive industries. Its customer base includes IBM Corp., Cisco Systems Inc., Delphi Energy and En-

gine Management Systems and Xerox Corp.

In addition to McAlpin, the leadership team consists of his brother Michael McAlpin, executive vice president, and Jon Chernak, chief financial officer. The pair nominated Kenneth McAlpin for the Small Business Council award and wrote a six-page application to support his case.

"We don't actually have our own product; rather we build products for other people," says Kenneth McAlpin, a Webster resident.

The company does business both with original equipment manufacturers and contract manufacturers.

Customers are often in a hurry to produce a new product and forget to consider the metal parts they will need to attach to that product.

"That's where our engineers come in and design a customized item," he says.

In addition to caring for its customers, the management team tries to build a nurturing culture for company employees. Common company events include wheeling an ice cream cart around the plant when it becomes warm during the summer, and flipping hot dogs and hamburgers at on-site companywide picnics after a major project is completed.

"We are all team members and treat one another as human beings," says McAlpin, as he sprints through the plant, greeting each machine operator and assembler by name. "Our employees have a right to their own good name and their own dignity."

"We deal with problems in private, but we praise in public. Our people make us successful. If you asked me to build a die, I couldn't do it. But I hire people who can, and I'm never threatened by people who know more than I do."

David Delaney experienced the company's commitment to quality a few years

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Close-up

Kenneth McAlpin

Title: President and CEO, McAlpin Industries Inc.

Age: 45

Home: Webster

Education: B.S. in business management, St. John Fisher College, 1977; MBA, St. John Fisher College, 1988

Family: Wife, MaryAnn; sons, Frank, 20, Matthew, 18; daughter, Lisa, 14

Interests: Golf, reading, photography, and playing the drums

Quote: "There's more to life than going to work and coming back home. We all have a responsibility to do something for our community."

back when he purchased canister brackets for fuel emission products for Delphi. He fondly recalls his interactions with Kenneth McAlpin.

"In my book, Ken rates high in integrity and approachability and can be both fun and serious," says Delaney, now a quality analyst for Delphi. "Best of all, unlike many other suppliers, he always made sure to call on us just to make sure everything was going well. That's unusual. Usually, it takes a quality issue to bring someone around."

Many community organizations have benefited from McAlpin's commitment to excellence. He has served in numerous leadership roles at St. John Fisher College, where he earned a bachelor's degree in business management and an MBA.

The CEO also is involved at St. Rita's Church in Webster, and he is a member of the newly created Work Force Investment Board, a city-county worker-training venture.

One of McAlpin's favorite community activities is helping his high school alma mater evolve into a new institution with new leadership. He chaired Bishop Kearney's presidential search committee last year, helping the school select its first layperson administrator. He now serves as chairperson of the school's 17-member board of trustees.

"Ken was a big factor in my decision to come here," says Bishop Kearney president Mark Peterson, who started his job in July. "He has the rare ability to be both cautious and decisive.

"He studies all the facts methodically, but once he is convinced of a strategy's merits, he moves ahead quickly and confidently. As a leader, he uses a collaborative approach among our trustees. But if the discussion gets hung up, he recognizes that it's time to move forward and encourages the group to take a vote."

Peterson and McAlpin confer on the phone daily, if only for a few minutes. McAlpin's counsel was particularly helpful during a recent dilemma, notes Peterson. It occurred when the administration needed to decide whether to allow four students—two campus leaders and two advanced science scholars—to remain in Florida to watch graduate Pam Melroy's twice-delayed launch as pilot of the Space Shuttle Discovery.

"Ken had an eye on this situation throughout the delay and supported the decision to allow the students to stay," he says. "I appreciated his advice throughout this unusual situation."

In addition to serving with local organizations, McAlpin enjoys playing golf, reading novels by Stephen King, John Grisham and Tom Clancy; and taking still life photographs.

He calls reading King's thrillers "my diversion." And he purchased numerous



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

McAlpin, right, says the firm's employees "daily make miracles for our customers."

copies of Steven Pressfield's golf novel, "The Legend of Bagger Vance," for staff members when it was published in 1995.

Despite his community and business involvement, McAlpin calls his family his top priority and expresses great pride in their achievements.

His wife, MaryAnn, is a reading specialist for elementary school students in the East Irondequoit school district. Son Frank, 20, is a junior at Clarkson University in Potsdam, and Matthew, 18, is a freshman at SUNY College at Fredonia. Their youngest child, Lisa, 14, is carrying on the family educational heritage as the fifth member to attend Bishop Kearney.

While his organizational activities are fairly visible, McAlpin's business associates and employees may not be aware that he is a drumming fanatic.

Having played for both Bishop Kearney and the Greece Cadets Drum and Bugle Corps., McAlpin now can be found drumming every few months in the pit orchestra for local productions.

Recent gigs have included Bishop Kearney's production of "Crazy For You" and Rochester Association of Performing Arts' staging of "West Side Story."

"I'm a jazz fanatic and drumming will always be in my blood," he says.

This musical outlet helps relieve the stress as he and his management team devise ways to deal with pressure from foreign competition.

"In the last decade, we've lost some good business to Asian competitors, and that's been kind of tough," he says. "But the sit-

uation has improved considerably over the past two to three years as we continue to keep a close eye on our target market."

Despite the challenges, the firm has been recognized the past four years as one of Rochester's top 100 fastest-growing privately held companies.

Citing the need for continual expansion and procurement of new equipment, McAlpin changed commercial banks a few years ago and credits M&T Bank with helping the company to grow.

"M&T has a 'can-do' spirit and they never try to put up roadblocks in our way," he says. "Together, we are committed to the company's continued expansion."

The company's CEO strives to ensure McAlpin Industries remains true to its philosophy on quality. That philosophy is posted in the office lobby, and reads: "Every associate has the responsibility to understand who their next in-line customers are, what those customers need, and how to measure their success in meeting those needs."

Based on their 30 years of friendship, DeBusk believes that Kenneth McAlpin's embodiment of that pledge helped him earn the Small-Business Person of the Year award.

"I sat at the table as they announced Ken's name and could see that he was in shock about winning the award," he says. "But knowing Ken for as well and as long as I have, the news did not shock me one bit. He is more than deserving."

Debbie Waltzer is a Rochester-area freelance writer.