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Leominster firm is taking plastics to a higher level

By Brian Lee TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF



Albright Technologies CEO David R. Comeau stands outside the company's clean room, where products are made that help astronauts in space. (T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)

LEOMINSTER — Ask David R. Comeau about his growing liquid silicone company at 25 Litchfield St., and he'll first talk about painting and break dancing.

Founder and CEO of Albright Technologies, Mr. Comeau hired an artist to paint pictures throughout the building, which he said fosters creativity.

And when a United Space Alliance official and an astronaut visited Albright earlier this year — to congratulate the company on making a tiny device that kept eatables inside astronauts' food bags — Mr. Comeau reciprocated with a presentation of break dancers from Leominster and Worcester.

This was also to show how creative Albright can be, Mr. Comeau said.

“What would you do when astronauts come in?” he asked.

The device Albright assembled is attached to the food bag's foil cap. The astronauts stick a straw through the bag, as demonstrated by Matt Bont, a senior quality engineer from Clinton.

Mr. Bont said at one time he'd thought astronauts somehow managed to eat floating food.

“Every video you ever see them in is with food floating around,” he said.

Albright received a certificate of appreciation from Brian Breen, associate program manager of the United Space Alliance, which is responsible for contracts that support NASA's International Space Station.



This small device manufactured by Albright Technologies helps astronauts to eat in space.

(T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)

The visit was part of the alliance's motivational program in which it visits 40 of its 2,000 space shuttle suppliers each year.

Loren J. Shriver, an astronaut who's logged more than 194 hours in space, also landed in Leominster for the event.

Meanwhile, Albright, which moved here three years ago from Sterling, is looking to continue its takeoff into molding devices for medical device and military markets.

It has 15 employees, five of whom are engineers, Mr. Comeau said. The company was founded 15 years ago and moved to Leominster three years ago,

The challenge, Mr. Comeau said, is that designers are more familiar with plastic, but less so with silicone components.

To address this, the company has surged into online marketing and offers a free downloadable silicone manual and silicone samples.

In addition to not knowing what the company does, product developers don't know it exists, Mr. Comeau asserts. Still, Albright grew 20 percent last year and 100 percent the year before.

Its growth is attributed to the company's ability to react quickly to customers' needs because Albright is small, Mr. Comeau said.

"We have some projects that could turn into multimillion contracts," he said. Albright is in "the unique position of not having a lot of competition."

Growth, he conceded, does create concern. "My concern is we're doing high-volume production," he said. "Eventually the Chinese (whose labor costs are lower) will be doing it. We don't want to be faced with that issue."

To stay a step ahead, the firm vows to be innovative and creative and is looking to get into implantable drug-delivery devices.

A nasty infection, he said, can be treated with a device that gets implanted at the location of the infection instead of a pill that affects the entire body. Those devices could have an estimated value of millions, he said.

Albright also makes long-term implantable devices.

Mr. Comeau said he didn't feel comfortable molding such devices until he got a clean room that provided ISO-quality, ultra-clean environments for the biopharmaceutical industry.

Mr. Comeau said "industrial friendly" Leominster was helpful because the permit process and inspections of his clean room were efficient — and fast. Elsewhere, permits and inspections could take a combined four months or longer, he said.

The 70,000-square-foot building suits Albright, Mr. Comeau said, because it has ample room for expansion. The company is using 5,000 square feet and the unused portion is warehouse space.

Mr. Comeau said he was uncertain of how many new employees he wants to bring on. The company has an extensive training process, he said.

"That's why we have a lot of engineers here, and we believe in retaining the employees," offering what he called a good benefit package for a small company — 50 percent health insurance, \$25,000 life insurance, an entirely employee-paid disability program and 4 percent matching 401(k).