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## Cutting metal, building communities

### Newcomer finds collaboration key to unlocking doors of opportunity

In the words of John Donne, no man is an island, and few fabricators embrace that idea more than Sandra Tillman-Daniels, owner of ACS Precision, Mercersburg, Pa. A newcomer to the manufacturing industry, Tillman-Daniels travels all over southern Pennsylvania and neighboring states, advertising the business, looking for fabricating opportunities, and drawing together people who wouldn't otherwise rub elbows. Her spearheading a project to raise funds for the Lilian S. Besore Memorial Library in nearby Greencastle, Pa., is a perfect example.

"Hagerstown [Maryland] had a project in which artists created 30 butterflies that they displayed around town, and the money raised benefited a local art school," she said. "Other communities have done fundraising projects with cows, mules, and horses. Our local library is in need of funds, and our community needs art out where we can all enjoy it. This type of project brings people into a town to enjoy the displays. I believe it will bring all of us together for the benefit of our community."

Playing off the name of the town, Tillman-Daniels thought about castles. She contacted the library director and the director of the local Chamber of Commerce, and it wasn't long before the idea became a project and Tillman-Daniels was figuring out ways to recruit additional people to help. ACS' role is to provide aluminum components; students from a local vo-tech school will weld and bolt the components together; high-school students have been lined up to make the bases and attach the castles; and local artists have been invited to submit plans for decorating them.

One of Tillman-Daniels' goals is to bring together people who might not otherwise have much interest in artistic projects.

"I'm hoping that the students who are involved will come to the unveiling, and come downtown when the castles are displayed, and tell their families and friends, 'I worked on this.'"

Her knack for getting people interested in projects is an extension of two of her business owner duties: marketing and sales. While word-of-mouth advertising is more than enough to support most fabricators during good times, Tillman-Daniels picked an unfortunate time to enter this industry: early 2008. She spends a lot of time knocking on doors, making calls, and attending local functions to gain business. Often she knocks on doors that others pass by.

"I didn't know any local fabricators who serve the airport and the surrounding shops there," she said. "I thought, hangars and aircraft need a lot of metal and cutting. With our ISO certification and cutting abilities, that community should be a good market for us. After months of marketing and visiting, we finally broke in with a few owners and companies. One local pilot does topographical work and had mounting plates made in California to hold these \$600,000 or \$700,000 cameras. Now we make most of his mounting plates at ACS Precision."

She also knocks on other fabricators' doors, looking to form partnerships that capitalize on each other's capabilities and capacities.

"We can do some machining," she said, referring to the company's Haas TM-1 mill's capability. "But other shops



Although ACS Precision does quite a bit of work in cutting sheet metal and plate, its work doesn't end there; the company's capabilities include bending, welding, and machining. And, probably because of its owner's design background, it complements its industrial work with artistic work. Photographs courtesy of Steve Weddles.

specialize in machining, and we specialize in cutting. We can send them machining work and they can send us cutting work."

If Tillman-Daniels brings a unique perspective to fabricating, she owes it to her unique background. No dyed-in-the-wool manufacturer, she grew up in a family of entrepreneurs in the construction industry. She studied retail and residential design at The Art Institute in Pittsburgh and was recruited straight from school to work for Fitzgerald and Assoc., the manufacturing representative for Elkay Manufacturing Co. and Chicago Faucets, manufacturers of myriad plumbing items.

"They had contacts on the commercial side, but they wanted to sell their products to designers," she said. "I knew a lot about construction and had a degree in design, so I knew the jargon and had the ideal background, so they hired me."

Having come from a family of entrepreneurs, she figured that eventually she'd work for herself. In looking for opportunities, she found a small shop in Mercersburg.

"It was a diamond in the rough," she said. Rather than go it alone, Tillman-Daniels and her partner and general manager, Charlie Daniels, decided the company would have more potential if it had a specialty and partnered with other fabricators and machine shops. Hers is a small shop that does low-volume, prototype, and custom work, yet has broad capabilities—it can bend, weld (GMAW and GTAW), cut, punch, roll, notch, and nibble—with an emphasis on cutting.

"We're unusual because we have both laser and waterjet," Tillman-Daniels said. "The waterjet opens up doors to opportunities other than metals, such as plastic, stone, and rubber."

Tillman-Daniels' expansion plans reveal her background in design, love of art, and interest in building com-



munities. She is thinking about a move to an industrial park, to a building that has not yet been constructed.

"It will have extra-wide hallways with alcoves," she said. "Once per quarter we'll invite local artists to place new artwork in the display areas, and we'll make our lunchroom available for making presentations."

Tillman-Daniels concedes that in the projects she's involved with and the communities she's creating, one of her goals is to showcase ACS Precision. However, her company isn't the only one that stands to benefit. Another overriding goal is to expose young people of both genders to careers in manufacturing, potentially helping other manufacturers with the looming skills shortage. This couldn't be any clearer than the opportunities that come with the Greencastle library project. In addition to engaging vo-tech and high-school students, the project might inspire a youngster to visit the local library, check out a book on manufacturing, and eventually join the fabricating community. **FAB**

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