

# Astro Craft a part of the whole

By KURT BEGALKA

kbegalka@shawsuburban.com

SPRING GROVE – Focusing on the craftsman in “craft” has enabled family-run Astro Craft Inc. to survive and thrive in an environment where others have failed.

The McHenry County Economic Development Corp. recognized this by presenting the 42-year-old precision machine shop with its 2010 Business Champion Award for small businesses with fewer than 25 employees. EDC President Pam Cumpata cited the company’s optimistic attitude and experience as key factors in the award.

And they are experienced.

The average tenure among Astro Craft’s 22 employees is 15 years. Shop foreman Tony Bapert of Genoa City, Wis., who has worked there since 1976, said the friendly environment and opportunity expanded his knowledge and kept him there.

“Every guy is responsible for his own area. The machine is his area,” said Ed Dschida, who co-owns the business with fellow Johnsburg residents – his brother, Otto, and cousin Richard Dschida.

It all is about accountability. Fewer than 1 percent of the parts they make are scrapped, despite dealing with thousands of individual part numbers. About 10 percent are tested using computers, micrometers and calipers to keep it that way.

“We have built checks and balances into our system,” Otto said. “We’re literally splitting hairs here, 3,000ths to 4,000ths of an inch on some things. You can’t measure what we do with a yardstick.”

Employees are encouraged to aid in that quest for quality by making suggestions to improve the operation. They also are cross-trained to handle a number of different jobs ... out of choice and necessity. When the economy hit hard at Astro Craft in September 2009 and it was down to three days a week, the Dschidas redirected



Stephanie Janisch - sjanisch@shawsuburban.com

**Mike Chodorowski, an employee of Astro Craft, Inc. for 11 years, files off the rough edges on a piece of metal that will be shaped into a handle.**

## Astro Craft Inc.

**Where:** 7509 Spring Grove Road, Spring Grove.

**Phone:** 815-675-1500.

**Web:** www.astrocraft.com.

efforts internally – reorganizing the company, maintaining machinery, improving record-keeping – until they returned to a 40-hour week.

“Improving the plant positioned us to do better when the economy does pick up, and I’m seeing some signs of that,” Otto said.

“In the meantime, we will continue to absorb the bumps.”

### Staying consistent

The Dschidas bought the company from their parents 22 years ago. Astro Craft was

started by Ed and Otto’s dad, Wendel, and their uncle Martin – Richard’s father – and a partner Earl Fry in 1968. Since then, plenty has changed.

The facility moved from a 3,500-square-foot plant in Johnsburg to its current 10,000-square foot plant in Spring Grove in 1976. It added another 15,000 square feet about 14 years ago and reorganized into 18 state-of-the-art CNC machining centers. Twenty years ago, it had nine CNC machines.

The company also added computerized mills and lathes, as well as a Bridgeport milling machine – replacing the manual operations of old. It even has a machine, capable of handling metal bars up to 48 inches long, that marries milling and turning – enabling Astro Craft to

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craft complex aerospace parts in a matter of minutes.

“We have invested a lot in more leading-edge machinery,” Otto said. “Without doing these kinds of things, I think you are on the way out.”

Astro Craft serves about 30 different companies in a variety of industries, including automotive service, spray painting, packaging and copying equipment, health care, communications, cosmetic, pharmaceutical and heavy equipment.

Materials include stainless steel, platinum, aluminum, titanium, brass, copper and plastics; used to make everything from temperature sensors to aluminum floor polishing discs.

“We handle more than 1,000 different drawings a year,” Otto said. “We run prototypes of five or 10 pieces up to 50,000 pieces.”

And they are able to do so because everyone pitches in and divvies up the load.

Rich, 45, oversees the turning area – that creates precise parts for the medical and aerospace industries. Otto, 52, is the point man for customers, handling bids and quotes. And Ed, 57, specializes on quality control – bolstered by a ISO9001/AS9100 registration in 2004 after a class at McHenry County College.

“A lot of shops have a small number of people that set machines up. We have specially trained people who run each cell, keeping them engage in the process,” Otto said. “And we have continuous improvement. ... In any field, if you have people who do work and are offering in put to make things better, it really does improve things.”