

Cover Story

They are the champions, my friends

By KURT BEGALKA

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CRYSTAL LAKE – More than 250 business leaders from throughout McHenry County gathered Sept. 23 for the McHenry County EDC's annual dinner and Business Champion awards celebration.

Three area companies were honored as Business Champion Award winners.

- Astro Craft Inc., a Spring Grove custom machining company that supplies parts to the aerospace, health care, the military and cosmetics industries won in the small business division for companies with 24 or fewer employees. Other nominees were: Chirch Global Manufacturing and Wirfs Industries, McHenry; Huemann Water Conditioning, Johnsburg; Joseph H. Huemann & Sons, Ringwood; Marengo Signs, Marengo; Stone Hill Shopping Center, Fox River Grove; Tessler Construction Co., Crystal Lake; and The Woodstock Independent, Woodstock.

- Jan-Air Inc. of Richmond, which makes air movement products for HVAC systems, won in the medium business category for companies with 25 to 100 employees. Other nominees were: Corporate Disk Co. and Mastercoil Spring, McHenry; Exemplar Financial Network, Crystal Lake; and Silgan Plastics, Woodstock.

- Scot Forge of Spring Grove, forges an array of products for aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and heavy equipment, won in the large business category for companies of more than 100 employees. Other nominees were: Althoff Industries Inc., Curran Contracting Co. and General Kinematics, Crystal Lake; Associated Electrical Contractors, Woodstock; Dean Foods, Huntley; Family Service & Community Mental Health Center, McHenry; Kenmode Precision Metal Stamping, Algonquin; Watlow Electric Manufacturing Co., Richmond; and Wauconda Tool & Engineering, Algonquin.

Craig Weidner, manager of Scot Forge's 375,000-square-foot headquarters and manufacturing plant in Spring Grove, confessed the honor caught him a little off guard.

"There were a lot of great companies represented there," he said. "I was a little bit taken back just walking through the door."

Weidner added that he felt a

little uncomfortable accepting an award reflecting the efforts of so many colleagues.

"There are so many people back here and in Scot Forge in general," he said. "You almost feel guilty standing up there."

McHenry County EDC honored their own on a day where the jobs picture for the county shone as brightly as it has in nearly two years. Earlier that day, the Illinois Department of Employment Security said that McHenry County's jobless rate in August fell to 8.6 percent from 9.5 percent in July. It was the first time since January 2009 that McHenry County's unemployment rate had been below 9 percent.

"I'm seeing and hearing that sales are still strong – although they're not at previous years' levels – but businesses are still cautious," EDC President Pam Cumpata said. "We've had more conversations about posting to our job board, although those have been significant positions,

and the people who are qualified for those are in short supply."

With an eye toward the future, Jan-Air is in the process of converting about 1,400 square feet of its plant into a testing lab, engineer's office and conference room. It will house a custom pressurized air-flow meter, fabricated in house with the help of a \$7,000 grant from the MCEDC, used to test blowers under realistic conditions.

"It was great when we got nominated," Jan-Air President Mark Sattersten said. "It was a great boost for morale around here, a great accomplishment of all 28 people here. We are so strong right now. It's been a great year, really. There was a lull in May and June, but it picked back up."

Keynote speaker Orion Samuelson, a agricultural broadcaster at WGN Radio for 50 years and a Huntley resident, told the audience that change was an inevitable part of the business. There will be bumps along the way – be it bird flu or H1N1 viruses – but he said the system is self-correcting. Samuelson noted the economy is resilient. For every opportunity lost new opportunities are created, such as the demand for large

animal veterinarians, agricultural engineers, plant geneticists, agricultural attorneys, bilingual interpreters and wind-turbine technicians.

"The biggest change we've seen is globalization," Samuelson said. "There is no longer a McHenry County agricultural business. We're global. We have to find ways to lead change, rather than let change lead us. ... I tell young people today, you can't dream big enough."

That is a concept embraced by owners of Astro Craft – from the purchase of new machinery and software to cross-training to a fostering a culture of creativity.

"It was a kick to be recognized in that manner," said Astro Craft co-owner Otto Dschida said of the Business Champion award. "We are kind of an under-the-radar type of company. There are people who are doing this work in the county and doing it well, but we are dedicated to doing this kind of work, not only in the county, but in this country."

• *Northwest Herald Business Editor Chris Freeman contributed to this story.*



Samuelson



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McHenry County EDC 2010 Business Champion Award winners (from left) Mark Sattersten of Jan-Air Inc.; Otto Dschida of Astro Craft Inc. and Craig Weidner of Scot Forge Co. pose for a photo with their awards after the Sept. 23 ceremony at the Holiday Inn in Crystal Lake. Astro Craft Inc. was named the Business Champion in the small category, Jan-Air Inc. won in the medium category and Scot Forge won in the large category.