

Couple's LED startup attracts attention, orders

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The Journal Record

Posted: 06:31 PM Wednesday, April 14, 2010



Industrial LED bars on a test stand at Crossroads LED in Collinsville. (Photo by Rip Stell)

COLLINSVILLE – A startup is moving at the speed of light, a pace that leaves the husband-and-wife co-founders amazed.

“It has happened that quickly,” said Buddy Stefanoff. “We did not expect to be at this point until the end of the year.”

Buddy Stefanoff and his wife, Dana, formed Crossroads LED at the end of February. They are working out of their house in Collinsville, preparing for a move into a manufacturing facility. Crossroads LED is an electronic engineering and manufacturing company that focuses on creating solid-state, or LED, lighting products. An LED, or light-emitting diode, is a semiconductor device that emits light when an electric current is passed through it. It does not work the same way as a light bulb, so it does not burn out in the traditional sense. An LED emits light at specific wavelengths in order to produce a variety of colors.

Crossroads provides single and multicolor LED lighting solutions to the amusement park, entertainment and automotive accessory industries, said Buddy Stefanoff.

Buddy Stefanoff's experience with LEDs began almost 10 years ago when he developed the first wheel illumination device called Hublites. He recalls that in 2002, while having lunch with friends in Albuquerque, N.M., a couple of teenage boys stole the prototype center caps off his truck in broad daylight.

“Just came up and stole them right in front of us,” Buddy Stefanoff said, laughing. Because they were LEDs, it was easy to spot them a couple of days later. They recovered the caps without incident.

But the incident set off the light bulb in his head because he knew he was on to something.

Since those early years, Buddy Stefanoff has continued to discover new applications for LED lighting. Yet now, joined by his wife, he finds he has returned to his roots in their company’s first big order, which comes from an automobile venue – the Texas Motor Speedway.

And it came about the same time they incorporated.

By chance, Buddy Stefanoff met a TMS official.

“That led to a casual telephone conversation, which led to a face-to-face,” Buddy Stefanoff said.

“And, two weeks later we had a \$70,000 order,” said Dana Stefanoff. “Our lights will be there for the first race, in June.”

“We are designing and installing a custom ‘caution lighting’ system on the spectator seating fence line because before they could not see the caution light on the track,” Dana Stefanoff said. “Now, when there is a caution, it will alert people in the stands. The TMS wanted something with that ‘wow’ factor.”

Right now, the couple are working on a small scale, ironing out the manufacturing bugs and any logistics hiccups, said Dana Stefanoff, president. The couple refer to their home as their “beta” production line.

“We will need to translate this,” Dana Stefanoff said, motioning with her arm to the entire house, “from small-scale to large-scale. We want to shave time off of the manufacturing process.”

A lot of companies are too eager to get into a facility before they have their manufacturing steps down pat.

“They get into a facility, then try to figure out how to do everything,” Dana Stefanoff said.

The couple plan to have about 20 employees a year from now – mostly solder and electronic technicians.

“Once our funding is secured, we will be able to literally flip the switch and move forward with large-scale production,” said Buddy Stefanoff.

Buddy Stefanoff has an electronics background and was stationed in the Persian Gulf during the ’90s, working on Black Hawk helicopters. He was part of the First Infantry Division of the U.S. Army, nicknamed the Big Red One.

Once back home, he began tinkering with LEDs and using the lights as automobile accessories.

“It has been an evolution,” Buddy Stefanoff said.

While installing LED lights at the former Bell’s Amusement Park in Tulsa about six years ago, Buddy Stefanoff met Jeff Novotny, owner of the Texas-based Larson International. The pair struck up a friendship and today the ride manufacturer has several lighting orders with Crossroads. Novotny makes classic amusement park rides, including the Flying Scooter, Super Shot and Fire Ball rides, and provides lighting for attractions at Six Flags Over Texas. He’s made several carnival-type rides that are at the Tulsa State Fair every fall.

“He has an infinite number of choices,” Novotny said. “He makes quality material and is able to custom-tailor the product for our needs as well as the needs of the amusement industry.”

The advantage Crossroads has, and what is attracting so much attention, is the quality, Buddy Stefanoff said. The light tubes, which he sells beginning at \$55 a foot, are manufactured locally and in Albuquerque and El Paso – not China, which is earning a reputation for producing poor-quality LEDs.

“Many of the lights produced overseas do not make it through a season,” Buddy Stefanoff said. “Ours are guaranteed for 100,000 hours. They are water-tight. They can last 10 years.”

The LED lights are popular, Novotny said.

“They are the way the industry is going because of the cost savings and less maintenance,” he said.

Dana Stefanoff agreed.

“Everyone is asking for LEDs. In fact, amusement park owners are telling the ride manufacturers, ‘Do not send rides to us without the LEDs,’” Dana Stefanoff said.

The couple’s timing is near perfect.

“This is the time to be doing multicolor lighting,” she said. “The amusement and entertainment industries are ordering these lights because of the cost savings and low maintenance.”

Also, incandescent light bulbs will be banned beginning in 2012.

While it is still up in the air how this will impact businesses, what is not debated is that over the past eight to 10 years everyone’s awareness of environmental issues has grown.

“People are paying attention to these issues,” Dana Stefanoff said, “and LED lighting is one of the solutions to those concerns.”