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Firms spring up from farmland



'Silicorn Valley' home to shops

By Jenny Callison
Enquirer contributor

The farmlands of West Chester Township have proved a fertile environment for the growth of a transplanted high-tech business - its owner says he's found "Silicorn Valley."

Rite Track, a 65-employee company that manufactures silicon wafer processing equipment, has benefited from the area's economic and cultural climate, says its owner, Timothy Hayden.

"This area is rich in engineering and technical talent," explains Mr. Hayden, who moved his venture in 1994 from a San Francisco Bay-area garage to what he calls "the heart of

Silicorn Valley."

Greater Cincinnati's machine tool shops provide a reliable source of parts, and local colleges are tuned in to the company's work force needs, he says.

"We participate in cooperative programs with Cincinnati Tech and UC and several other schools," he says. "Many times, students who have co-oped with us come to work for us after graduation."

After contending with California's job-surfing labor pool for several years, Mr. Hayden returned to his native West Chester, where he says there's a different work ethic.

"Workers in the Midwest are more loyal and tend to stay with a company for longer," he says.

West Chester's demographics have spurred growth for Prime Valet dry cleaners, says company owner Paul Szydlowski.

"It's got lots of double-income, upwardly mobile families, which ties in with the customers we try to serve. They are pressed for time and concerned with quality. Image is important to them."

In the past several years, Prime Valet has expanded from one location to six. Two are in West Chester and two are in neighboring Mason and Sharonville. There's a store in Liberty Township and one in Kenwood.

Mr. Szydlowski points to West Chester residents' strong sense of community and their loyalty to local companies.

"People like to do business with people they know," he says.

Paige Wurtz moved her gift shop from Tri-County Mall to West Chester Road two years ago. An analysis of Queen Anne's clientele showed that the majority of her customers lived in Mason and West Chester.

"The traffic flow is less than at the mall, but the people who come in generally buy from us," she says. "There's more of a neighborhood feel. But the clientele now is looking for different merchandise, so our purchasing has really changed to accommodate that."

The Union Centre exit has yet to develop a strong retail pull, said Ms. Wurtz. She is hoping that development of the Marketplace complex at Interstate 75 and Union Centre Boulevard will bring more shoppers to her part of the township.

School Tools opened its education supplies shop in March in Union Centre Plaza.

"Parents watched us going in and found us immediately," says owner Joel Collins. "And, since we sit near five large school districts, we get lots of orders from teachers, especially at the beginning of the year."

Tywana and Brian Smith recently launched a Web-based business from their home in West Chester Station. Mrs. Smith, frustrated in her search for a variety of high-quality

African-American hair care products, formed Treasured Locks.

"Our neighborhood is a multicultural, multi-ethnic neighborhood, and we have clientele from all ethnic groups," Mr. Smith says. "One of the main reasons for starting the company was to meet the special needs of African-Americans. However, we have quickly expanded to products that are beneficial for the hair and skin care of everyone."

Adds Mrs. Smith: "We've sold to people as close as across the street and as far away as England. We plan to use the Internet to promote the company internationally and local relationships to grow the company here in West Chester."

Biz quiz

Think you're up to date on West Chester businesses? Take this test to determine ! your INK (In The Know) Quotient. Name the:

1. Largest employer.
2. Oldest business.
3. Ice-cream icon.
4. Largest business under one roof.
5. Newest hotel.
6. Only business with a school bus inside it.
7. Most puzzling business.
8. Two places where you won't mind getting fired.
9. Eatery supposedly named for a bovine disaster.
10. Township's biggest chill.

Answers: Page G27

1. Lakota School District, which employs more than 1,600 people.
2. Port Union Caf?.
3. The Cone, a family hangout on Tylersville Road. Built in the shape of an ice-cream cone, this seasonal favorite serves hot dogs and a variety of soft-serve treats, including its popular orange and vanilla swirls.
4. Cornerstone Consolidated Services Distribution Center. The company's facility covers almost 1 million square feet and houses Frontgate Outlet.
5. Sleep Inn & Suites on West Chester Road.
6. School Tools in Union Centre Plaza boasts a real school bus in its! store. Youngsters board the bus (which is stationary) for story time several days a week.
7. On a Lark, a creator of educational toys and games, produces its own line of art and cartoon puzzles.
8. You can paint (and fire) your own design on a pot at MasterPIECES in West Chester Centre and at Kil'N Time Cafe in Olde West Chester.
9. The Dented Silo Pub on Tylersville Road is named for a nearby silo that supposedly was damaged by an airborne cow in a 1980 tornado.
10. Pierre Foods, which is building a \$20 million, 23,000-square-foot addition to its frozen-meat processing plant on Princeton-Glendale Road. The addition will boost Pierre's employees from 750 to about 870.

The Cincinnati Enquirer / MICHAEL SNYDER

Cutline: Tywana Smith started an online ethnic beauty products business from her West Chester home.

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