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Area businesses tip hat to Cass Co. EDC

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Travis and Jennifer Kelley (and son, Jackson) pose with the Cheatah door-hanging tool developed by their company JenTra Tools.

Travis and Jennifer Kelley, of Backus, owners of JenTra Tools, thanked the Cass County Economic Development Corporation recently for providing business planning assistance. "We wouldn't be here without their help," Jennifer said. "They have been nothing but helpful and kind."

The Kelleys and Arnold Volker, of Next Innovations in Walker, shared their experience working with the nonprofit CCEDC at the corporation's annual meeting Sept. 27.

The CCEDC formed 15 years ago to assist with economic development needs in the county.

The corporation and Executive Director Gail Levenson, provides free, confidential business counseling to new business startups and existing businesses that are expanding or relocating in Cass County.

The Kelley's JenTra Tools is one business that got its start in Cass County and is growing.

About two years ago Travis came up with the idea for the "Cheatah," a tool system that helps ensure doors are hung level and plumb more quickly than with traditional methods.

The Cheatah is manufactured in Rogers, Minnesota, and the Kelleys sell, package and ship the product from their Backus home.

The couple shipped around 4,000 Cheatah tools to distributors in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and on the West Coast. A number of Minnesota lumberyards - including some in the lakes area - carry the Cheatah.

Aside from developing and marketing the tool, the Kelleys have also updated their website www.jentratools.com, and have added a new instructional video.

They thanked not only the CCEDC for business start-up assistance, but also Crow Wing Power and the Initiative Foundation for financial assistance and Legal CORPS of St. Paul for legal services.

Next Innovations

Arnold Volker is CEO of Next Innovations located in the Walker Industrial Park. The 60,000 square-foot facility - producing metal home, lawn and garden art and signs - was built in 2005.

Next Innovations is perhaps most well known for its EyCatchers brand of metal, wind spinners.

John Zacher, now deceased, founded the business in 2002. There are four other Next Innovations manufacturing plants located in Minnesota, Volker said.

The business now employs 30 employees - but at its peak employed 85.

In April 2012, Next Innovations signed a deal with Sea World and Busch Gardens to create an exclusive line of wall art for them.

The company has product in the majority of Amazon Warehouses in the U.S. and also manufactures cart corral signs for SuperValu and Cub Foods. They also work with Landscape Structures of Delano, Minn., a company that designs playgrounds.

Next Innovations creates decorative finishes on metal and glass - including gun engraving for Reed's Sporting Goods in Walker. Some of their products are being used in the Southdale Mall renovation in Edina.

"We probably wouldn't have done a lot of this without Gail's help," Volker said. "In 2005, when John (Zacher) built the facility, Gail (Leverson) was heavily involved. We were one of the first JOBZ programs in the state. That's worked very well for us."

While the economy has taken a toll on a lot of businesses, "It's a matter of focusing and getting into some new products and new markets; (to) take what we have learned in the past to apply that and reach out to new customers," Volker said of their business strategy.

Executive Director Gail Leverson, of the CCEDC, said that in 1997 a group of people got together to form that nonprofit organization to help serve economic development needs in the county.

According to the articles of incorporation, there were four pages of names of people involved in the original effort, Leverson said.

"You took your vision - you knew that there was a need for better job opportunities and a larger tax base in Cass County - and you acted on it," Leverson said of the first CCEDC board. Some original board members attended the Sept. 27 annual meeting at Northern Lights Casino.

Stable jobs are really important and that's why the CCEDC exists, to provide year-round long-term jobs with benefits, she said.

In 2012, the CCEDC helped a number of Pine River and Backus businesses including: the Pine River Laundromat, JT Industries, Inc., JenTra Tools, Pine River Family Market and Trussworthy Components, Inc.

The CCEDC helped establish a computer lab in Pine River that offered computer training in 2012. They also partnered with Pine River-Backus School District and Central Lakes College to offer some college courses in Pine River.

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