Monroeville Industry Expansion

Monroeville may not be Birmingham, Mobile, Huntsville, Montgomery, or Tuscaloosa—with their big ticket banking, aviation, shipping, and automobile operations—but it is proud of its growing reputation as an industrial recruiter and the expansion of its existing industrial base.

Announcement by the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce and Florida-based International Sign and Design that ISD will add 40 new employees and 30,000 square feet to its Monroeville facility is the latest development in the town known as Alabama’s literary capital (Cynthia Tucker, Mark Childress, Truman Capote and, especially, Harper Lee, author of To Kill a Mockingbird). ISD originally came to Monroeville in 2005, and their recent expansion there writes a new chapter in one of the most important industrial developments in Monroe County in recent years.

The expansion project is in the construction phase but has already generated a lot of excitement in the area, says Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce. “The people of Monroeville are very energized about this addition,” Smith said. The company makes colorful electronic signs that employ new technologies in design, fabrication, installation, and project management. Among its well-known clients in retailing and restaurants are Target, Ethan Allen, Marshalls, Stein Mart, T.J. Maxx, Applebee’s, and Ruby Tuesday.

AERN’s ongoing role in the process, Smith said, was to make marketing packages, statistics, and other economic data available to the chamber and the company in both the recruiting and expansion stages. Smith said economic and demographic data available to the chamber from AERN resource materials were extremely valuable in letting the company know about the area’s workforce, economic infrastructure, and other factors.

The company first brought jobs to the Monroeville area when the original 30,000 square foot facility came to the community in 2005. The plant’s clients are mostly in the Gulf Coast states of Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, and Louisiana. The Monroeville facility was built when there was a high demand for signs after the Hurricane Katrina disaster in August of that same year. In addition to improving Monroe County’s economic and employment conditions, the expansion of the ISD plant will bring more positive attention to the city, Smith said.

When the move to Monroeville was first announced, AERNews covered the development. “This is one of our top recruiting success stories over the past few years,” Smith told AERNews at the time. Without question, she said, the quality of the information the chamber was able to provide about the area’s workforce, economic infrastructure, and other factors.

The company will be adding an additional 40 jobs in 2008 and 30,000 square feet to its existing 30,000 square foot facility in Monroeville. NiCarla Friend
On November 9, 2007 June Buchanan opened the doors to Home Spun Quilts in Butler, Alabama with the help of her brother and sister-in-law and the resources provided by the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network. Home Spun Quilts specializes in handmade quilts custom created for any customer’s needs and wishes, and the business also carries a large selection of fabrics and other materials any serious quilter would need. The store is located at 120 Mulberry Ave. in Butler, serving the Demopolis, Linden, Thomasville, and Butler markets, and also Meridian, Mississippi.

Buchanan and her brother and sister-in-law, Jackie and Lisa Soper, started the business as a family enterprise. Lisa helps with the store while husband Jackie focuses on sales and public relations. Together Buchanan and the Sopers have 20 years’ experience in the quilting business, according to their website www.thehomespunquilts.com.

As the family was organizing to open their new location, they relied heavily on the resources at the chamber of commerce to help build a Web site and a plan to get their doors open. Buchanan said that starting a business was both expensive and hectic, but she is optimistic it will pay off in the end. Buchanan had previously operated a quilting shop out of her home but felt that it would be better for her to move the business. “The quilting part of the business was doing pretty good, but if I was going to sell other stuff I needed to be closer to the public so they could see it,” she said.

The choices of custom-made quilts include college logos, NASCAR, hunting and fishing motifs, and replicas of old-time quilts. Buchanan said the biggest selling items are Alabama and Auburn themed quilts. Buchanan said that last year she made about 36 Alabama and Auburn quilts. “Every quilt I make, I make by myself,” Buchanan said.

Prices depend on what type quilt the customer orders. For example, a collegiate quilt will usually cost around $300 for a king size, $275 for a queen size, and $250 for a full size, but a quilt that requires more handwork could cost as much as $400.

On average, Buchanan says her quilts are in the $250 to $300 range and she can usually have an order ready in about three days. Business seems to stay steady year round with a small drop in demand during the summer months.

Besides custom made quilts, Home Spun Quilts offers fabrics and other accessories, such as threads, rulers, cutting mats, needles, and sewing machines needed for sewing and quilting. The fabrics come in different colors and patterns that include polka dots, stripes, and floral designs. Fabric prices range from $2.99 to $7.00 a yard. “We have a good price range on our fabrics and a good selection,” Buchanan said.

Home Spun Quilts also offers classes in how to quilt and how to incorporate a variety of techniques. “We can teach you to quilt if you’re a beginner or help you learn an advanced technique,” Buchannan said.

AERN partner Nancy Gibson, executive director of the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce and Community Development Foundation, said, “Homespun Quilts’ business is really about family pulling their resources together to make an American dream come true. Business planning and start-up are crucial to the success of any business. The AERN center will continue to provide quality business support to any business, both new and existing. In today’s economy, planning and preparation are vital. Each year the AERN center provides workshops in continuing education to foster growth in small business development. We are excited to say that we have been apart of this business start-up. The role of the AERN center is technical support. If you are thinking of going into business be sure to give us a call.”

AERN puts modern business tools in the hands of local entrepreneurs in 14 rural Alabama counties. Through partnership with chambers of commerce and other agencies, AERN provides local access to the computing, information, training, library, and other resources of The University of Alabama. For the AERN site in your area, see http://aern.cba.ua.edu

Jonathan Stinson
Retailers from Monroe and surrounding counties looking for tips to improve their businesses received loads of best-practices information at the Retail Seminar held in Monroeville on March 12. The seminar, jointly sponsored by the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network and the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce, focused on topics such as the importance of customer service, doing market research for yourself, and listening closely to your suppliers.

A pilot program, the seminar has already generated followups in the community. The chamber of commerce reports they have had several visits from local entrepreneurs seeking additional information. Handouts from the seminar are available free of charge at the chamber office.

AERN co-director Annette Watters hopes to bring retail seminars to other counties now that the initial one has received such positive feedback. “We hope this seminar has two impacts. We hope it will help existing retailers get ideas to make their businesses more profitable. Also, we hope potential entrepreneurs will be encouraged to start a new business,” Watters said.

The seminar featured several speakers and a panel discussion on “Tips & Trends in Retailing.”

David Carrington, president and chief executive officer of RacingUSA.com, addressed participants at AERN’s Retailing Day seminar in Monroeville on March 12, 2008. Dr. Lauren Skinner, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, spoke about knowing the market in which you’re selling. Skinner suggested a strategy of looking at other markets to discover what’s selling well before choosing what to sell in your own market. Skinner also suggested attendees register to receive the National Retail Federation Smart Brief, a free daily e-mail newsletter with top retail trends and news.

Shawn Beitelspacher, owner of Southern Sole, a specialty shoe store in Tuscaloosa, found a specialty Nike running shoe in St. Louis that he added to his store. Thirty pairs sold almost immediately. Today, Beitelspacher sells a couple hundred pairs a week of the item. He cautioned, however, to start small and test the market when adding trendy items.

And while most agreed with trend watching, Mickey Gee, president of The Pants Store and Taylor Company of Leeds, also emphasized offering something that no one else in the local market sells to increase both sales and
customer base. For Gee several years ago, this meant adding a line of Croc shoes in his store, of which he sold $18,000 worth within the first week he added the Croc line.

In addition to the strategies above, the presenters suggested stocking items specific to the local area. For Monroeville retailers, suggested items would be those that tie in with Monroeville native Harper Lee’s 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the best-selling U.S. novel in the 20th century.

Even if you happen not to like an item, you should still try carrying it if it is selling, Gee said. Skinner reinforced this point with an example of a line of men’s clothing that she bought when she was working for a major retailer. Even though she thought the line was unappealing, her taste was not the same as the department store’s customers. All the panelists advised that retailers cannot offer for sale only items that they like for themselves or their homes.

Speakers also warned retailers against becoming attached to their inventory.

Dr. Bob Robicheaux, former UA College of Commerce faculty member and now Marshall Scholar and professor of marketing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and Skinner both agreed that if an item isn’t selling, mark it down and move on. They reinforced caution against buying inventory based on personal opinion.

Employee satisfaction was also a topic of discussion. Carrington stressed the effect good employees have on customer service and the importance good service has in running a successful business. He repeatedly warned that a business built on price alone is “not worth a nickel.”

Ralph Stacey, president and chief executive officer of the Chamber of Commerce Association of Alabama, gave a very inspirational address to the group about the importance of the business community to America. The economic engine of our country rests largely in the hands of consumers, and entrepreneurs are the people who provide the goods and services that make America’s economy healthy. The retailers present were praised not only for their contributions to the quality of life in their local areas, but also for their contributions to the American economic system.

*Callie Corley*

(Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroeville Area County Chamber of Commerce, contributed to this article.)

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