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Martinez Photography

Andy Wells launched Wells Academy to provide manufacturing job training.

SMALL BUSINESS

Entrepreneur shares his gifts

• Andy Wells of Wells Technology Inc. in Bemidji is being honored for his business accomplishments and community contributions.

By TODD NELSON
Special to the Star Tribune

Growing up on the Red Lake Indian Reservation, Andy Wells often saw his father and grandfather pitch in to help friends and neighbors.

Now Wells, a successful inventor and entrepreneur, carries on that tradition in an innovative way through Wells Academy, which provides free job training to prepare young American Indians for manufacturing work.

"The time and talents we have from our creator are gifts," Wells said. "When we use them to give back and

help other people, that's our gift back to our creator."

Wells, 64, launched the training program with funds from Wells Technology Inc. in Bemidji, which he founded in 1990. The company makes and distributes high-precision machined fasteners and other parts. The company, which supplies clients in aerospace, defense, electronics and other industries, has 31 employees, double its 2004 total.

The nonprofit training program, which also has received a number of grants, provides full-time, paid apprenticeships. It has seven students and will

produce its first graduate next month. Wells will offer graduates jobs at his company or help them find work elsewhere.

"We don't hold our graduates captive," Wells said. "There's no understanding or agreement they'll stay here after training. ... The focus is on helping them and not on just helping ourselves."

Wells will be recognized Tuesday for his business accomplishments and community contributions, when he is named 2006 Entrepreneur of the Year by the Metropolitan Economic Development Association (MEDA).

Wells continues: "He is always looking ... to learn and grow." D6 ▶

longtime client Best Buy Co. Inc. Peterson also becomes president of the American Association of Justice (formerly the American Trial Lawyers Association) in July.

AMA v. UNH

The American Medical Association has weighed in on UnitedHealth's pending acquisition of Las Vegas-based Sierra Health Systems with an emphatic "no."

The AMA frequently has sparred with UnitedHealth on its various mergers, and the mergers of other health insurers, arguing that a consolidated industry is bad for doctors and patients.

Inside Track continues on D2 ▶

small business

A Twin Cities entrepreneur started a thriving bike-retailing precocious ways 30

Bemidji entrepreneur Wells shares his gifts

• WELLS FROM D1

The Minneapolis nonprofit (<http://meda.net>) assists minority-owned and -managed businesses through training, financing, consulting and other programs.

"He is always looking for opportunities to learn and grow," Yvonne Cheung Ho, MEDA's president and CEO, said of Wells, who has received business coaching and mentoring from MEDA. Wells also is part of MEDA's Pacesetter program, a three-year course of specialized counseling that helps entrepreneurs round out their skills as executives.

Cheung Ho said she admired the unity and work ethic that Wells and his family demonstrated when she visited the company, which is 225 miles northwest of the Twin Cities. Wells is president and CEO, and wife Carol was the longtime office manager before stepping back to spend time with grandchildren. Their son, Andy Jr., is vice president of operations, and daughter Wendy is national marketing manager.

"To see how close the family is, how they all work together for the success of the company, is very impressive," Cheung Ho said. Wells and family members often greet employees as they arrive each morning or thank them as they leave for the day.

"He appreciates his employees just like he appreciates his family," Cheung Ho said. While many entrepreneurs look for ways to give something back, Wells has gone further than most with Wells Academy, said Edgardo Rodriguez, MEDA business consultant who works with Wells.

"He offers the youth in the community a future," Rodriguez said. "He teaches a lot, and he's constantly sharing his knowledge."

Wells taught shop classes for two decades at Bemidji State University, where he received a bachelor's degree in 1966 and a master's degree in 1969, both in industrial technology.

A job at Polaris Industries in Roseau captured his imagination. He began as a draftsman,



GILBERT MARTINEZ • Martinez Photography

Andy Wells "The time and talents we have from our creator are gifts. When we use them to help other people... that's our gift back to our creator."

then designed one of the early front-engine snowmobiles. "That's where I saw manufacturing and was part of it and I had that interest," Wells said. "As I was teaching, that was always in my mind. I wanted to get into the real world and see if I could be an entrepreneur."

In 1985, he got a grant that allowed him to leave teaching for a year to take an internship with the Magnetic Peripherals unit of Control Data Corp. He designed some robotic systems that were well-received, and stayed on as a part-time consultant after he returned to teaching.

He later took a leave from Bemidji State and worked full time for Control Data until the company folded in the late 1980s.

Wells later consulted for the Gold'n Plump poultry plant near St. Cloud, where he developed air-powered scissors to replace manual ones he said contributed to carpal tunnel injuries among line employees. The scissors are one of

a half-dozen inventions that Wells has patented.

Back in Bemidji, Wells began hiring people to produce the tools, and Wells Technology was on its way.

In recent years, a partnership with Fastenal Co., the huge Winona-based maker of fasteners and other industrial supplies, has contributed to Wells Technology's rapid growth. The companies are working together under an SBA-approved mentor-protégé program, with Fastenal providing business and technical assistance to Wells.

Under Fastenal's supply-chain diversity program, Fastenal nationally distributes some Wells Technology products and Wells Technology is a distributor of Fastenal products, said Donnalee Papenfuss, executive director of government and diversity affairs for Fastenal.

Fastenal also happens to be one of Wells Technology's biggest customers, buying more than \$600,000 worth of high-

WELLS TECHNOLOGY INC.

Business: Makes fasteners and other precision-machined parts

Founded: 1990

Headquarters: Bemidji

Website: www.wellstech.com

Employees: 31

Executives: Andy Wells, president and CEO; Andy Wells Jr., vice president of operations; Wendy Wells, national marketing manager

2006 revenue: \$31 million

Strategy: Grow business and gain expertise through relationship with Fastenal and MEDA's Pacesetter program; expand apprenticeship program to include 12 students and make it a model for other companies to study.

precision machined parts and fasteners from its smaller partner, Papenfuss said.

"We've had other protégés in the past, but Wells Technology is by far our shining star," Papenfuss said. Both companies evolved out of manufacturing fasteners and machined parts, so they share an understanding of their customers.

The Fastenal connection has helped Wells Technology grow rapidly, with revenue

rising from \$1 million in 2004 to \$31 million last year. But the soft-spoken Wells downplays his company's growth.

"My focus is not on the money but on using the money to make good things happen," Wells said.

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