

BULLY TOOLS[®] **IS BULLISH** **ON THE FUTURE**

Family-operated
company
experiences
double-digit
growth

By Wanda Lenoir



HPM molding machines are essential to the tool manufacturing process.

The American Dream is alive and well at Bully Tools. As young children, we are taught to believe in the ideals that are the founding principles of our nation. We learn that living in a free country allows us to prosper and become successful even when the odds are against us. With hard work, ingenuity, and determination, it's possible to have big dreams and make them come true.

Mark Gracy, the founder of Bully Tools, risked everything when he walked away from a steady paycheck to follow his dream of manufacturing the product he developed. It didn't take long before money got tight, unexpected problems cropped up, and long hours kept him working into the

night. However, with the love and encouragement of his wife Carol, he kept going.

In this issue, Mark Gracy, President of Bully Tools shares insights about his company, manufacturing, customer service, and the importance of working together as a family.

How did you get into the manufacturing business? What were some of your biggest challenges?

It all starts with one product idea 25 years ago. I was involved in developing a unique shingle remover that I thought I could sell. My problem was I had little funding and no one to do the manufacturing. One baby step leads



Bully Tools plant in Steubenville, Ohio

to another. There was a lot of trial and error. I had to learn how to manufacture products without a playbook. Many long hours of work and sleepless nights, but somehow, I was able to survive another day. I had quit my job as a building inspector for the City of Pittsburgh and took my small life savings and rolled the dice. I couldn't have done it without the support of my high school sweetheart, best friend, and wife. There is an old Kenny Rogers song, "She Believes in Me." It reminds me of her every time I hear it.

When you founded Bully Tools almost 30 years ago, many companies were moving their manufacturing facilities to other countries. Why did you decide to open your operation in Steubenville, Ohio?

We started in 1994 by renting about 1,500 square feet in the corner of a much larger building just north of Pittsburgh. In the beginning, we used outside vendors for a lot of the production steps like laser cutting parts and powder coating. We bought components where we could and only made what we couldn't get elsewhere. We would have the parts shipped to us, weld them together, and then send them back out to be powder coated, shipped them back in for assembly and then out to our customers.

I wanted to bring as many of the processes in-house as possible to eliminate the costly shipping and long lead times with trying to coordinate with outside vendors. I didn't like being dependent on others, so I continued to roll profits into expanding our in-house capabilities. Once we were more established, I was able to attract investors. I was able to pay them back in a few years and have used profits and traditional banking for financing our growth after that. Yes, other companies were moving everything, but I had no interest in joining them. I can't count how many people told me how foolish I was. I guess I was too dumb or stubborn to quit, so I plugged along

with my pledge of 100% Made in the USA, materials, and labor, or we don't add it to our line!

In 2006, we built a new factory in Steubenville, Ohio, about 35 miles west of Pittsburgh. Ohio was very accommodating and helped finance the expansion with the promise of job creation. We quickly exceeded our commitment and paid back the state in eight years instead of 15. I relocated from Pittsburgh because Pennsylvania's tax structure, workers compensation program, utility costs, and political climate were unfriendly to manufacturing.

It was bitter-sweet moving from the town I had lived my entire life in, but I can honestly say that I would have gone out of business if I had stayed.

Share your thoughts on the growing demand among consumers for Made in the USA products.

Generally, the first impression of buyers is that Made in the USA means "expensive." Once we get them to realize that we are less expensive than the competition in our trade category, the conversion to our program is easy. The recent



Bow rakes are one of nearly 200 SKUs produced at the facility.



tariffs situation has gotten the phone ringing just like the docks strikes did a few years back. Customers realize that they should pay better attention to supply chain issues and source products from a stable supplier here in the USA.

In what ways do the products Bully Tools manufacture differ from competitors?

“Perception becomes a reality.” If the consumer doesn’t perceive our tools as better than the opening price point shovel that we compete within stores, then why pay more? We have re-engineered every product we sell. Yes, our products are better, but everyone could say that. How do you know it’s true? When you pick up one of our shovels, bow rakes, or even a garden hoe or any of the nearly 200 SKU’s People say, “WOW, that’s a good tool.”

Technology is constantly changing. How does your company leverage new technology to control costs, and maintain quality?

I’m always asked, “How can you sell your products for less than the completion?” We are very efficient in how we make our products and embrace technology. In our Ohio factory, we have robotic welding, plasma cutting, CNC automated wire bending, overhead conveyor powder coating line, injection molding, heat treating, tempering, stamping, and we do it all under one roof and don’t waste money or time on slow boats from China.

What is your philosophy on the importance of customer service?

Most of our sales are through two-step distribution, and we are what is standardly called “Policy A field destroy.” We find it’s much more satisfying to a customer that has a return to take it to the place they bought it and get a replacement immediately. We get very few returns, and usually, it’s not a defect, but they failed because of misuse or abused products. We give them a new tool and keep them happy.



Left: Robotic technology helps streamline production and reduce costs. Right: Grabbing tools are an easy solution for removing tools that are hard to reach.

How do you generate ideas for new products? What role does customer feedback play in the process?

I test every product we sell before we add it to our line. I try to think of ways that the product will be abused and check it with that in mind. I then do the same testing with the competitive product. If we don’t win handily, then we go back to the drawing board. I’d say our style is trial and error. Over the years, product design has come naturally, and I have a good feel for what direction to go design-wise to achieve our goals. It’s now come full circle, and many of the latest improvements have come from my employees’ ideas. We quickly build prototypes and go into testing in real-world conditions. Many times we have gone from ideas for improvements to a product in a matter of days. We continuously look for ways to make our products better, not cheaper.

What is the most important thing you want the readers of Cutting Edge to know about your products and company?

Bully Tool’s commitment to 100% Made in the USA is unwavering, and it has served us well as proven by our ninth straight year of double-digit growth. Although we can no longer be considered a small company, we still have the family feel to it. My wife Carol handles HR, my son Adam handles sales administration and trade show coordination, and my son Sean handles online sales, marketing, and brand awareness. All of us have the same commitment to Made in the USA.

This year we are up over 15%. We make quality products at a price that is less than what you would think. As we add new customers, we are mindful of our existing ones and take steps to ensure we have scaled up to meet the demand. We are already projecting a 20% increase for 2020. Give us a call and see for yourself why we are taking market share away from the import companies! ■

NEW!

One-piece Poly Scoop

- A multi-purpose year-round tool ideal for scooping mulch, grain, brush, snow, feed and other materials
- Made from a high quality and lightweight FDA 21 CFR 177.1520 copolymer polypropylene that makes it easy, comfortable, and food-safe to use for any job
- Scoop measures: 14" W x 17" L with a total tool length of 42.75"
- D-shaped polypropylene grip with a no-slip texture, designed to increase leverage and reduce hand fatigue, while wide enough to accommodate work gloves
- Available in three colors: Black, Green, or Rust
- 100% Made in the U.S.A.



100% MADE IN THE U.S.A.
BULLY TOOLS

For additional information or to find a distributor
contact us at 800-469-5522 and ask for Adam.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CIRCLE 105