

The Ripple Effect

Transferring
success
to the
community.

By Laura Weiner

While growing up on the reservation of the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe Indians in Minnesota, **Andy Wells**' parents taught him an important life lesson—the value of giving back. Every Sunday, Wells' father would grab his toolbox and call for Wells to join him. The pair would go to neighboring houses to fix a leak, a door that just wouldn't stay shut, or a squeaky hinge. On one of those afternoons, Wells asked his father why they did these things without receiving payment of any sort. His father replied, "When you give, it will come back to you." Wells now understands the significance of that statement. As president and CEO of **Wells Technology, Inc.** and the **Wells Academy**, he helps people find jobs and he provides them with opportunities to learn, grow, and become something they never thought they could be. And while watching others find such success, Wells has found a sense of happiness he never thought he would achieve.

Wells Technology, founded in 1986, manufactures high precision small parts, fasteners, bolts, and screws. The company makes about 1,200 different products for the medical, aerospace, and food industries. All of this came easy to Wells who, along with fixing things, has been making things since he was a child.

"At first I would just invent things to use myself," such as rockets, automotive



Andy Wells

tools, a spoon with a thermometer built into the handle, electric salt and pepper shakers, and a double-ended screwdriver. "But then I learned how to make industrial products and get patents. Now I mostly invent power tools. I really look to make tools that prevent problems, such as carpal tunnel syndrome."

The 32 employees at Wells Technology, double the number he employed just three years ago, learned how to use the machines (Wells has 10 computer numerical control machining centers, two coordinate measuring machines, and a room full of quality assurance equipment) by going through company-provided training. That got Wells thinking.

"I wanted to give young Native American people an opportunity to learn a skill," he says. "That was important to me. I think most people succeed in life because they have a lot of people who helped them along the way. I got

to my position in life because I had a lot of help, so now I have the opportunity to help other people. What I can do is provide the knowledge needed to work in manufacturing."

In 2006, Wells started Wells Academy, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit school for industrial training. He did so with grants, profits from his company, and seed money from some of his customers. Students accepted by the academy go through a year-long, 40-hour-per-week program that provides intense training so they can become professional machinists. Students get paid while learning, starting at \$9 per hour and moving up to \$12 to \$14 per hour while they are training.

Randi Burris attends Wells Academy. When asked where she would be if it weren't for Wells, she pauses for a moment to reflect before answering.

"Well... I am not sure where I would be," she finally replies. "I would probably be at home, looking for work."

Burris, like so many on Native American reservations, has only a high school education, but she was eager to do more than work a minimum-wage job. Stories like hers are the reason Wells started his company and subsequently the academy.

"I started my business for two reasons. One was that I was always interested in the manufacturing industry, and I liked the concept of being an entrepreneur,

The *Ripple* Effect (continued)

working hard and being rewarded for that work," Wells says. "And second, I wanted to provide jobs for my community because there is so much unemployment on reservations."

Reports estimate unemployment rates on reservations average 60 to 70 percent. Wells built his company among three reservations in northern Minnesota—Red Lake, Leech Lake, and White Earth—to maximize its economic effect. According to The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, these are some of the poorest reservations in America.

"I started the company with my own money, bought a production machine,



Randi Burris

and repaired it myself," explains Wells. His wife helped him launch the business, and their son joined the company two years later.

"It was very difficult to find work at first, so I went to Minneapolis and offered to do prototype work for electronic companies, and we grew from there."

Burris has stayed on at the academy for longer than a year in order to expand her education even further.

"If I stayed here my whole life, I would probably still be learning from Andy [Wells]," she says.

Students—there are six enrolled right now and three have graduated since 2006—learn from more than just Wells' experience; they are taught by instructors from vocational schools in the area. Two instructors currently handle the curriculum, while several guest speakers, such as professionals from the finance industry, come in weekly to speak to students.

"We want to not only provide them a skill, but teach them the core ideas one needs to succeed," Wells explains. "Each week we sit down and sometimes a guest speaker comes in, and we just talk about things like courage, business, or how to save money."

With the academy located in the same building as Wells Technology, Wells is able to watch students learn and grow.

"When enrolling people, we look for those who want to make a change," he says. "I look at people's future more than their past. People are moldable, and we want to help them be all they can be."

In 2004, Wells had to ask for help himself. He noticed his company had reached a plateau, so he called one of his clients, **Fastenal Company**, and they worked together to set up a mentor-protégé relationship under Small Business Administration's guidelines. Wells had been a Fastenal vendor since 2002.

"I can't stress how important it was for us to have a big company's help," Wells says. "It really took us to the next level."

Donnalee Papenfuss, executive director of government and diversity affairs at the Fastenal Company, says that the relationship has been mutually beneficial.

"I met Andy Wells in 2004 to discuss how to grow his business with Fastenal," Papenfuss explains. "As a mentor, we provided assistance with the manufacturing of fasteners, as well as sales and marketing of their industrial supplies. We also assisted them in some national marketing opportunities."

Papenfuss says that while her company was teaching, it was also learning, and that has been invaluable to her.

"Andy Wells is committed to growing his company and creating jobs and business in a distressed community," she says. "One of the lessons Andy Wells taught me is that it is so important to

be more than successful, you have to be significant."

The Fastenal Company is now a corporate sponsor of the Wells Academy.

"It is just another example of how Wells Technology is keeping the spirit of diversity alive by reinvesting profits



Donnalee Papenfuss

into a training program," Papenfuss says.

Boasting 130 clients, with big names like the Lockheed Martin Corporation, Kraft Foods Inc., Tropicana, and

General Dynamics Corporation, Wells still hopes to grow his business with the virtue he thinks got him where he is today—patience.

"I attend a lot of trade shows," he says. "I will see someone from a company over and over again. I am a fairly humble person, so the first time I just tell them my name, shake their hand, and hand them a business card. Then a year later, I meet them and say hello again. Soon, I can gain their confidence."

And once he has a customer's confidence, he will do anything to not lose it.

"I heard that it takes three times more money to gain a new client than to keep the one you have," he says. "We want to keep our customers happy."

While it is clear that Wells loves his business, it is what his business can provide that brings him true happiness.

"The more I give, the better I feel about it," he says. "It isn't a matter of money. I'm not in this for the money. I just know that sometimes, with just some time and skills, you can change a person's life, and chances are they will change the life of someone around them." ♦

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