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BUSINESS CHRONICLE

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**Adams
Manufacturing:
Sticking to it
to become a
major player in
plastic furniture**

INSIDE: Q&A with Sherris Moreira ✨ **Preparing for Alzheimer's**





Bill Adams overlooks the floor of his manufacturing plant from an injection-molding machine. If you have plastic furniture in your yard, chances are his company made it.

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Sticking to it

A humble beginning selling suction cups leads Adams Manufacturing to become a worldwide giant in plastic furniture

Story by MARY GRZEBIENIAK

BILL ADAMS' 1976 CHEVETTE used to be his office and his only business machine.

Today it's hard to hear above the clamor of all the machinery at Adams Manufacturing, with offices at 109 W. Park Road in Portersville. The business has grown to four sites and 300 employees.

Adams, the owner, took an unusual path to becoming a manufacturing mogul. The 71-year-old Vietnam veteran started his career as an elementary school librarian in Pittsburgh. But he became disenchanted with public education and yearned to make his living doing something else.

When his grandfather, Charles Edward Adams, died, leaving him \$10,000, Adams seized his chance. He quit his job and came up with a product to help with the "energy crisis" at that time. He peddled "window blankets" designed to

keep the cold out by covering windows with bubble wrap held on with suction cups.

But his product got off to a slow start, to say the least. Business languished.

One day he saw a sign attached to a gas station window with duct tape. He went in and showed the owner how he could use suction cups and avoid getting messy tape residue off the window.

Impressed, the owner bought two boxes of the suction cups from him.

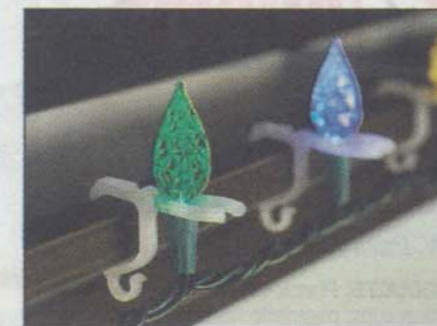
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"I had so much money that day, I couldn't close my wallet."

Bill Adams on his first big sale of suction cups



Magnet Man



Holiday lighting clips



Stackable rocking chair



Tablecloth clip



Deck planter



Tent stakes



Commercial calypso chairs, table and umbrella base

Product images by ADAMS MANUFACTURING

Tractor-trailers wait to load products manufactured at Adams' 50,000-square-foot Plant 1 on Park Road in Portersville. The company's newer Plant 2 on Route 422 is 2½ times bigger at 130,000 square feet.

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"I had so much money that day, I couldn't close my wallet," Adams recalls. He knew he was onto something big.

For two years, Adams made the circuit between Baltimore and Columbus, Ohio, selling suction cups to hardware stores in a string of towns. Business got even better when he began selling directly to the hardware stores' corporate offices.

Once he was selling thousands of suction cups, he started to think about quality control of the tiny gadgets "which nobody took seriously," he said.

"Nobody even really looked at a suction cup... when you really get into suction cups, it's really complicated. Around the end of a suction cup is billions of molecules of air," he said. One problem he noticed was that people would use their fingernail to remove the cups, scratching them and allowing air in.

The cups also focused light and could heat up, so he had research done to come up with a "light-diffusing design."

Today, the company website boasts the "Internet's largest superstore for bulk suction cups" which have been studied and researched for 30 years and which, Adams said, now have many patents.

The business branched out into a line of fasteners to hold up strings of Christmas lights.

Then Adams bought a mold to make folding plastic tables. He had it redesigned, and before long Adams Manufacturing was the world's biggest manufacturer of the folding plastic tables, suction cups and Christmas light holders.

Now Adams was selling to big companies. But there were problems.

"We had a hard time competing with 50 cent per hour Chinese and



Adams Manufacturing

109 W. Park Road, Portersville

- ▶ **PRODUCTS:** Plastic-resin furniture, suction cups, magnetic fasteners, and holiday decorating clips and hangers
- ▶ **MAJOR CUSTOMERS:** Home-improvement stores and retailers such as Lowe's, Walmart, Ace, Do it Best, True Value, Target and Amazon.com
- ▶ **ONLINE:** adamsmfg.com
suctioncups.com
- ▶ **PHONE:** 800-237-8287

Mexican labor when we were paying our workers \$15 per hour," Adams said.

In addition, the products needed to be assembled by hand, which was labor-intensive. And the company was constantly having to make sure it complied with a tangle of government regulations from agencies such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Department of Environmental Protection, workers compensation, as well as health insurance regulations that the foreign competitors didn't have.

"We were being a good neighbor. People were raising families on this. We had to do something," Adams said.

So 10 years ago, they branched out into stackable furniture – made in molds that required less labor. "We had to buy all the molds and equipment." Adams said, as well as obtain



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Bill Adams, standing, consults with his son, Bill Jr., about hangers for Christmas lights, one of the company's products.



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Employee Sean McElwain of Portersville puts finishing touches on a chaise lounge.

the necessary patents.

They got a contract with Sears. "After that came a couple of really tough years," he recalled. He credited Gary Dean, the chief financial officer and chief operating officer in New Castle, for bringing the company through the hard times. Dean has since retired. Three years ago, Tom Lombardo became president. "We have had really fine people," Adams said.

Now, on the other side of the hard years, the company has become the

world's biggest producer of stacking furniture. It makes a wide range of products including a tweaked version of the classic Adirondack chair.

"We put in a head rest, a lumbar support and curved it a little bit," Adams said, and five or six years ago debuted the first "new" Adirondack chair since the Civil War. Adams said it is much more comfortable than the old one. They looked at other designs, and did more revising, including making bigger, more-comfortable

chairs for America's ever expanding girth. "Now we have plastic chairs to hold a 350-pound person," he said.

And one of their products, the patent-pending Big Easy rocking chair, billed as the world's first stackable resin rocking chair, won the Best New Product at the 2015 American Manufacturing Hardware Show. All the investment, design and work paid off, Adams said, in the competition, which included Rubbermaid and other manufacturing giants.



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Employee Destin Gregory of Farrell gets a chair ready for shipping.

And of course, everything from Adams is made in the U.S.A.

Today their customers include Sears, Walmart, Lowe's, Home Depot, Ace, True Value, Do It Best, Orgill, Rite Aid and Target.

The Portersville factory has grown tremendously since it started "in a garage down the street."

After the humble beginning, they moved into a 15,000- to 20,000-square-foot building in Portersville, which has since been expanded to 50,000 square feet. They ran out of room and built Plant 2 on Route 422, a 130,000-square-foot factory. Then they bought two buildings in Ellwood City – the old Matthews Conveyor building on Factory Avenue and the Alslys building on Early Street. They also rent a facility near Cascade Street in New Castle.

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The company also makes residential and commercial furniture including ergonomic stackable barstools, chaise lounges, rocking chairs, bistro tables, magnets and fasteners, holiday wreath holders, light clips, and holiday suction cups, durable resin planters and tent stakes.

Adams said product development is expensive; costs can run \$1 million to come up with a new product.

But they have to keep a constant eye on being able to deal with competition from cheaper goods available from China or Mexico. "Increasing regulations are raising costs so people have to relocate. They are making

Bill Adams extends the spirit of loving your neighbor to his business. "I have to give my neighbor a good product; I can't take shortcuts."

it harder to meet payroll in Pennsylvania," Adams said.

What is his advice to surviving in business?

"Pray a lot and read a lot."

A convert to Catholicism, he said he believes that living out his faith means "you respect people and you have to love your neighbor." In everyday practice, he said this means "I have to give my neighbor a good product; I can't take shortcuts."

As for reading, "The more you know, the more you realize how little reading there is anymore. Nobody reads," the former librarian lamented. But he believes that reading, nonetheless, is critical to being educated.

Today, he gets help in the business from two of his children. Bill Jr. runs the engineering department and daughter Elizabeth just started working in sales. His son, Sam, does not work in the business but is an attorney at Smithfield Trust in Pittsburgh.

The international company strives to be a good neighbor from its Portersville factory.

In addition to its achievements in manufacturing, the company has



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Plastic pellets are fed through tubes from massive silos into an injection-mold machine, where they are melted and formed into furniture.

worked with Ellwood City Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club and Salvation Army as well as larger groups such as Habitat for Humanity, Children's Miracle Network Hospitals, Breast Cancer Research Foundation, Opportunity Village and Furniture

Bank of Central Ohio to help those who struggle with illness and economic problems.

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