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Small paint firm reaches for -- and hits -- the stars

NASA rockets among Jamestown Paint's clients

Wednesday, July 26, 2006

By Anya Sostek, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

There are numerous Western Pennsylvania companies doing business in faraway places, but not too many with products in the outer reaches of the atmosphere.

Jamestown Paint Co., which has been located on the same spot on Main Street in Mercer County's tiny Jamestown since 1885, manufactures the protective coatings used on the NASA space shuttles' solid fuel booster rockets.

It's a fact that often provokes a reaction among Mercer County locals. "They're pretty amazed," said D. Michael Walton, president of the company. "They don't think we got into things like that."

But what Jamestown Paint usually gets into is just as hard to define. The company doesn't sell any products off the shelf; rather, it manufactures specialty paint and coatings for each of its 225 steady clients.

The company's laboratory is littered with past projects, from Very Sexy cosmetics containers for Victoria's Secret to blue-tinted bottles of London Dry Gin to cab doors for trucks. Several of its biggest clients are metals and mining companies, such as Joy Manufacturing, Republic Steel and Sharon Tube.

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But the company's focus yesterday was on outer space. Alliant Techsystems Inc., a Utah-based company that manufactures the solid rocket boosters, brought a NASA astronaut to Jamestown for an appreciation event.

During a presentation to Jamestown paint employees and their families, astronaut James P. Dutton Jr. showed video of himself tossing a football and swimming through air on NASA's Vomit Comet, an airplane that simulates weightlessness. And he also expressed his gratitude to Jamestown Paint and other companies for consistent, high-quality work on every aspect of the space shuttles.

"One little change can have a profound impact, and that's the safety message that we try to pitch," he said.

The solid rocket boosters coated by Jamestown Paint "provide that initial 'umph' to get us out of the thickest part of the atmosphere," said Mr. Dutton, noting that after the shuttle discards the boosters, they parachute down into the Atlantic Ocean and are later recovered.

Sometimes, the operation goes so smoothly that the rockets don't even need another protective coating before they are used again, said Mr. Walton.

For that reason, NASA is one of Jamestown Paint's smallest customers. The company has been supplying the shuttle program for about a decade, but Alliant Techsystems only orders a hundred gallons at a time, just a few times per year.

Orders from the company's other clients average about a thousand gallons each, with the company producing a little less than a million gallons of paint per year, said Mr. Walton.

He is the third of four generations of his family to hold prominent positions with Jamestown Paint, which employs 58, many of whom are chemists.

Because all of its products are developed exclusively for different clients, Mr. Walton said Jamestown Paint has about a one-to-one ratio of research and development personnel to manufacturing personnel, which he said makes it unique among

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(*Anya Sostek can be reached at asostek@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1308.*)

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