

Bridgeline: roping in big business

What started as a hobby 12 years ago has developed into a company which employs 22 people in Belleville and supplies buyers in both Canada and the United States.

Bridgeline Ropes at 95 Hanna Crt. is a direct descendent of Linda Bridges' interest in macrame and other crafts. She and husband Keith had opened The What Not Barn on Wallbridge-Loyalist Road in 1977.

"We found we were having trouble getting supplies and decided to open our own store with craft supplies that weren't available in this area," says Bridges.

While the crafts business boomed in the early going, the couple found several years later that demand was on the wane.

"That's when Bridgeline Ropes was born. What we had learned through the crafts business was that there was a real need for rope for the marine industry and at first it was just a sideline but it just kept growing and we changed our name," says Bridges.

They also changed location in September, 1987 when they moved from Wallbridge-Loyalist Road to their new plant at Hanna Court. Keith Bridges is president while wife Linda is secretary-treasurer and Norm Grant completes the ownership team.

"We talked to boat manufacturers and they said there was a shortage of the specialized rope needed in their industry in Canada. At the time there was just one other company in Canada making the rope," says Bridges.

From that start, Bridgeline Ropes grew to a company which will produce any thickness of rope up to one inch in polyester and nylon and in any color imaginable.

"If the material is available, we'll produce it. One of our strengths is our versatility," says Bridges.

From providing rigging lines and rope for the sailing industry, the local company has graduated to providing cord to the garment industry, ski ropes and other specialty work.

"We supply rope to Ontario Hydro and we're in negotiations to do the same for Bell Canada," Bridges comments.

While most of the work done at the Belleville plant now involves braiding, Bridges says new machines coming from Italy soon will enable them to deal in twisted rope as well.

"We can do just about anything in braid right now but the new machines will make us more competitive. Right now it's just us and Poli Twine in this business in the area," says Bridges.

Bridgeline Ropes sells to buyers all over Canada and into the United States to customers in Virginia, New York, New Jersey and Florida. Bridges hopes the new equipment will allow them to export even more of their product next year.

"The new machines will help us expand and right now we offer specialty work and offer colors a lot of companies can't," says Bridges.

An example she uses is the new Loeb's grocery store in Belleville. Bridges says the owner wanted rope that matched the company's corporate colors. Bridgeline Ropes was able to do the job before the store's grand opening.

Much of the rope produced in Belleville goes to sailboat manufacturers and Bridges says she and husband Keith have long been interested in sailing.

"We did some sailing in Florida and Mexico and we always went to boat shows," she says.

Now Bridgeline Ropes sets up its own display at the Toronto Boat Show and the Toronto Sportsmen's Show.

The What Not Barn was the Bridges' first venture into business. Keith was originally from Toronto and Linda from Lindsay when Keith worked as an electrician at Bakelite Thermosets Ltd. in Belleville.

Bridgeline Ropes operates seven days a week for 24 hours each day with three shifts.

Linda Bridges says the next step for the company is to open a factory outlet store at the front of the plant.

"We have people coming in who want to buy things directly at the plant and a store at the front of the plant seems like the right idea," says Bridges.

Bridgeline Ropes makes its own polypropylene, which means the production of the rope is confined to one plant site.

In 1986, the company donated rope to Canada One in its quest to win the America's Cup.