

SarlaFlex employment tops 100

Walk through the front door of 1497 Industrial Road and your eye is drawn to a simple metal frame enclosing a copy of a purchase order.

Bobby Downs, president of SarlaFlex, compares the framed purchase order to a new business celebrating its first dollar.

"It's a big milestone for us," Downs explained. The purchase order is for the first sale of polyester thread made at the Walterboro facility. That sale, for 120 spools of thread, was made on July 8.

The locally-made thread went to Coats Honduras, a South American company that has been a good customer of Sarla Performance Fibers, SarlaFlex's India-based parent company. "That got the whole thing started."

"Sales have been good, we are slowly increasing," Downs said. "Basically we have been getting our people trained because to grow like we need to grow, we have had to add a lot of people very quickly." While Central America will continue to be SarlaFlex's main source of customers, Downs said American and Canadian companies are beginning to use the company's products.

Downs points out that when the new employees were hired they had no knowledge of automated manufacturing equipment and processes SarlaFlex uses to make polyester yarn and thread.

The main focus of SarlaFlex has been making sure their new employees are trained well, "actually our sales would be higher now if we were able to train our people faster," Downs added.

When SarlaFlex signed its economic development agreement with Colleton County Council and the South Carolina Commerce Department, the company promised to have employment up to 120 within 48 months. "It's been barely a year and we are already at 112

employees," Downs said. He anticipates the number of employees will remain at that level for the time being.

Downs suggests that the job creation caused by SarlaFlex locating on Industrial Drive goes beyond the facility.

He points out that the plan to use local suppliers should also result in new hires outside the four walls of the former New York Wire building.

SarlaFlex is buying its wooden pallets from the local Ifco Systems facility and is working with Paper Converters Inc. to have that local company begin making the paper tubes that hold the thread and yarn.

"We are well ahead of schedule; now we need to make sure we train our people properly, give them the information required to do the job," Downs said. "We are seeing that the people we have are very dedicated, very committed. We have to make sure that they are trained properly."

In automated manufacturing, training in the processes and procedures are critical, he suggested. "All automation does is create chaos at the speed of light if you don't have it under control."

Downs said Krishna Jhunijhunwala, Sarla Performance Fibers managing director, is already in the planning stages for the next stage in the evolution of the Walterboro operation.

He anticipates that employment will reach 140 when phase two is up and running, probably in 2015.

With the Jhunijhunwala family heading the operations, Downs said, "there will always be new projects, new additions."

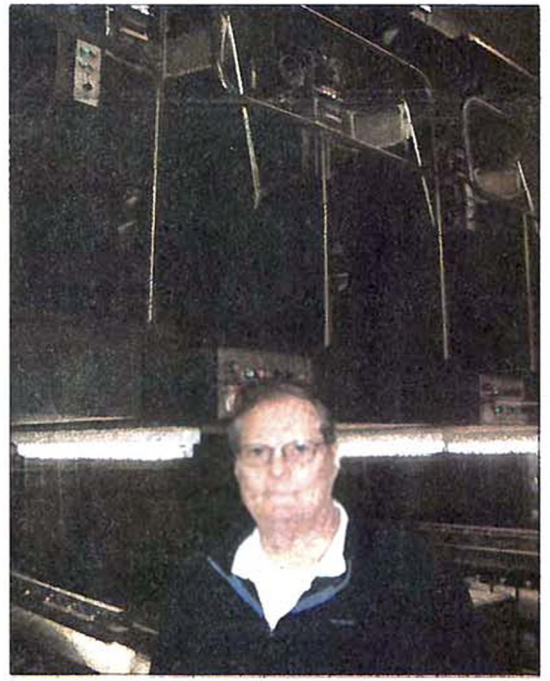
"We feel very good about being here, feel very good about the work force here and we feel that with the right investments and right projects we can be very successful," Downs said.

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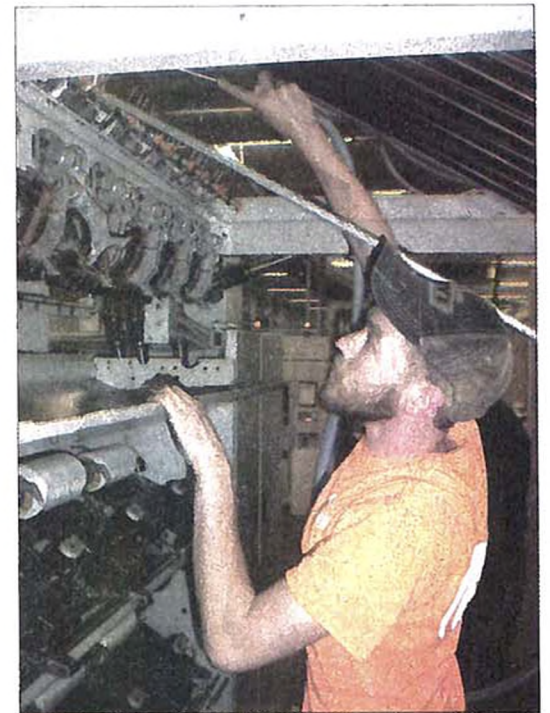
HEADING SOUTH. SarlaFlex Warehouse Operator Casey O'Quinn attaches a shipping label to a carton of thread that will be trucked to the port in Charleston and placed on a ship bound for El Salvador.



LEADING SARLAFLEX. Bobby Downs, president of SarlaFlex, stands in front of the bank of machines that produces endless strings of polyester that are turned into yarn and sewing thread by other machines installed in other parts of the company's massive facility on Industrial Road.



FINISHED PRODUCT. Automated equipment is used to wind yards of sewing thread onto spools at SarlaFlex. Each day the company produces thousands of spools of thread destined for companies throughout Central America, the United States and Canada.



MIINDING THE MACHINES. Texturing Operator Justin Regan Whitley oversees the operation of a bank of automated texturing machines installed in SarlaFlex's local operation.