

Inventing possibilities

Local business plans 40,000 square-foot expansion to accommodate new product

BY GREG WILKERSON
EDITOR

Despite the economic downturn that has hit communities across the nation, one local inventor and entrepreneur plans to expand his Loudon operation by 120,000 square feet through the next few years with the first 40,000 square-foot expansion getting underway before the end of 2009.

Eugene Gammons is making the expansion to Adroit Medical Systems manufacturing facility to accommodate production of his latest invention, the Wrapid-Pass, which will allow non-sterile operating room workers to pass items to those who are sterile more efficiently than the current procedure.

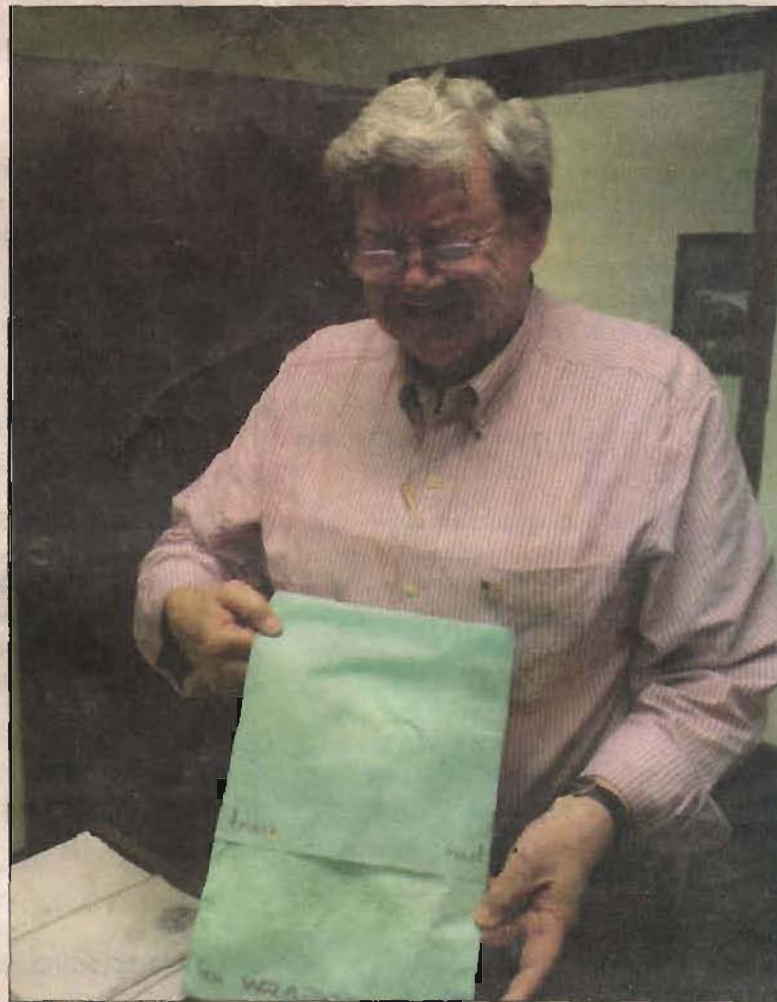
"It's a product to prevent inadvertent contamination," said Gammons, who has been in Loudon making disposable products for the medical industry since the early 1990s.

The sterilization pouch cuts down on materials by 40 percent from the current accepted procedure.

With the Wrapid-Pass the packaging itself the instruments are sterilized in becomes a sterile sleeve for the person passing the item to the surgeon or other operating room personnel.

Gammons said he expects the new facility to be operating in 2010, which will create between eight and ten new jobs in the community. By the time the facility reaches its full size in about three years, Gammons said it will need a workforce of up to 40 or more people.

In addition to saving cost in materials, the Wrapid-Pass also cuts down on time wasted in the operating room by making the process of transferring instru-



GREG WILKERSON | NEWS-HERALD

Eugene Gammons plans to expand his facility by 40,000 square feet in the next year to manufacture his newest invention, Wrapid-Pass.

ments between non-sterile and sterile people more efficient without compromising cleanliness.

"It's got a lot of good benefits," Gammons said. "It'll go into every operating room in the world."

Gammons said he thinks it is "wonderful" his company is able to provide jobs locally in an economy where many manufac-

turing operations are being moved overseas.

The recession hasn't hurt his business either.

"The health care industry is recession proof to a point," he said.

Gammons' life and business here are featured in the News-Herald's Community Life section, B1

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BY MARY E. HINDS
STAFF WRITER

The Loudon County Economic Development Agency's (LCEDA) plan to sell .63 acres at Centre to Johnny James for his Wine and Spirits liquor store has hit a snag.

Both the Loudon County Commission and the City of Loudon passed resolutions approving the sale of the property, but neither it seems the business requires .67 acres, necessitating the sale again approved at the new site the plan receive a variance from Loudon zoning laws.

In a brief, special-committee meeting Tuesday, March 23, the Loudon City Council approved the sale of .63 acres located in 75 Business Park to J&M properties. Lynn Mill Loudon city manager the approved land transfer was to a company owned by James, winner of two Certificates of Commerce awarded applicant for a Loudon liquor store.

At Thursday's meeting of the LCEDA, Loudon County Mayor Doyle broached the subject of the size change. He said he could not sign off on the sale for .67 acres with

Idea man

Local industry 'Adroit-ly' avoiding economic fluctuations

BY VICKY NEWMAN
FEATURES EDITOR

Carrying an inconspicuous but ever-present black notebook, Eugene Gammons walks through the Adroit Medical Systems manufacturing facility in Loudon.

As he walks, he nods to workers, who are busily assembling or packaging products. He speaks to some, inquiring of their health and their families.

Adroit's climate is much like a close-knit family. Many of those who work in the business are Gammons' family members. Most are his friends.

The little black book is an extension of Gammons. It contains the story of his life — in journal entries of every day going back to 1967.

In the journal are notations of his ideas for inventions, outcomes of experiments in product development, and possible applications for using the data.

He has gathered quite a bit of data through the years. The journal has proved invaluable many times in numerable ways.

"Nothing I ever did was a waste of time," Gammons says. "I learned from it, and was able to use that knowledge later."

Gammons says he was fortunate to become involved in product development on the threshold/cusp of major paradigm shifts in health and medical industries.

The first big change was when the medical industry shifted from natural, reusable products requiring sterilization and disinfecting, to disposable, antiseptic, one-use products.

In the 1960s, hospitals began to use disposable products to prevent and reduce contamination, such as paper gowns, paper hair coverings and shoe covers, latex or plastic gloves, plastic syringes, etc.

The second major change was the medical industry's use of heating/cooling technologies for better surgical outcomes, particularly in organ transplantation.

Gammons' first foray into this field came in the 1970s, when he invented a sterile hydrothermal blanket, designed to safely return a post-surgical patient's temperature to normal and increase blood flow, promoting healing.

At a time when many industrial operations are scaling back production, and company executives everywhere are wondering whether businesses will survive, business has remained steady and strong at Adroit Medical Systems. If anything, demand for the products manufactured here has grown. As populations age, health issues become increasingly prevalent.

Adroit makes a variety of products—the majority are disposable medical products and heating and cooling systems used primarily by the medical

profession. However, some Adroit technology is used to cool safety suits worn by NASCAR race drivers.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and Gammons is adroit at adapting technology in unexpected products.

Although he never worked in a medical field himself, and does not hold an engineering degree, Gammons' inventions are products in use in virtually every hospital in the United States, and many other countries.

Gammons started on this particular career path in 1957. At 24, he was working as general manager in a tool and dye plant in Indianapolis, Ind., when a chemist from Eli Lilly asked him to develop a disposable blood and urine collection system for operating rooms.

Thus challenged, the young man put his creativity to work.

He made a mold, designed a prototype and produced 10 samples for the potential customer.

"He came back and ordered 50,000. That changed my thoughts about the tooling industry and disposable goods. In '57, I started to put my thoughts into disposable medical products. I could see opportunities to go in that direction, and it has not been a mistake."

Gammons learned early that he possessed a knack for problem solving, making prototypes and developing effective ways



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Eugene Gammons, left, and son Scott Gammons pause during a morning walk-through at Adroit Medical Systems.

to produce items.

"I am a mechanical engineering Purdue (University) dropout," he says, laughing. He can afford to laugh. Today, his sole patents and patents to which he contributed total more than 40. He continues to be sought regularly to create new products for industries. Five patents for his products are in the works now.

"People often will ask me, can you make something to do this?" He says. "And, if I see something is really a problem, I will approach it. A lot of times, individuals have niches (of interest) but nobody else is interested. We absolutely do research to make sure people will buy it."

For years, Gammons' company was the sole producer of the hydrothermal blanket.

"It was the first in the country — the first in the



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Eugene Gammons looks over a new product that provides cooling for everything from organ transport to race-car driving.

world," he says. "When the patent was out in 1991, we were able to start Adroit, because I knew where the bodies were."

Gammons has had numerous business ventures since. Adroit Medical Systems serves as the umbrella organization for

multiple efforts.

Adroit is an adjective — meaning "clever," "skillful" and "inventive" — that ideally describes what the business is about, Gammons says.

"Adroit was born on a

ADROIT: *Industry avoiding problems, economic fluctuations*

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pool table in 1991," Gammons says. "Our first place was a 900-square-foot room in Morganton, N.C."

The operation came to Loudon in the late 1990s.

Gammons discovered the Knoxville area by way of boat, traveling the Tennessee River.

He decided to move somewhere in the Tennessee Valley, and that somewhere ended up being Loudon. Here, he found an ideal area with room to grow, he says.

"We bought the property in 1992 — 8 acres of a defunct sewing factory with 20,000 square feet," Gammons says. "In '96 we doubled the size of the building. Six years ago, we added a second plant, and purchased 14 more acres. Originally, in the early '70s this had been part of the first Loudon Industrial Park, but it didn't take off

too well. We acquired the rest of it, 22 acres."

Adroit employs about 100 people and is poised for another significant expansion in the near future.

There are several reasons for the company's success, Gammons says.

"We're not caught up in the economic structure with the layoffs. Business has been strong. We compete with ourselves to make a better product. We don't depend on many outside individuals; we do everything ourselves. We design and build all of our own equipment. Our growth has been tremendous."

Some items produced locally are produced cheaper than in Japan and China markets, Gammons says.

Son Scott Gammons, who serves as Adroit's vice president for marketing and sales, says he has

learned to trust his father's instincts about products and business ventures.

"Dad's genius has helped transform an industry.... And, the interesting thing about it is we have come full circle and we're still in the same market."

"A lot of products Dad pioneered we don't manufacture today, but they are in use in hospitals all over the world in the same configuration as he invented," Scott Gammons says.

Current trends in medical and health support markets are toward "green" products, that are ecologically friendly, and toward home health products for aging populations.

"You have to be Adroit, and that is part of Dad's genius," Scott notes. "He will see something most folks can't recognize as an opportunity, and develop it, like he did in 1967."