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Helping employees succeed

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Staff photo by Joe Phelan

Kenneth G. Priest II, the president of Kenway Corporation, is a Kennebec Valley Chamber of Commerce award winner.

AUGUSTA -- One sells fiberglass industrial equipment and boats. One sells ice cream and cakes. And one sells trees and landscaping services.

The only thing the three winners of the Kennebec Valley Chamber of Commerce's President's Award seem to share, other than the award itself, is an appreciation and respect for the employees that have allowed them to succeed.

The award winners are Kenway Corporation in Augusta; Dairy Queen in Augusta; and Wingate Landscape Co., based in Hallowell.

Owners of all three businesses share credit for their businesses' recognition with their employees.

"The award is not because of what I've done. My employees are getting this award, not me," said Augusta resident Frank Wingate, owner of Wingate Landscape Co. with his wife, Alyssa. "One hundred percent of our key personnel come back every year. They get paid well and are rewarded for their good work. They're great craftsmen."

Sidney resident Debbie Paszyc and Gardiner resident Carrie Arsenault, co-owners of Augusta's three Dairy Queens, know what it's like to be an active high school student while holding down a job at an ice cream shop. That's because Paszyc began working at Dairy Queen when she was a 14-year-old attending Hall-Dale, and Arsenault starting working there as a 13-year-old Cony freshman. So they understand their 70 mostly young, part-time employees' busy schedules and don't ask workers to sacrifice priorities more important than work.

"We look for honor roll students and we want well-rounded individuals involved in sports and extracurricular activities," Paszyc said. "We understand their high school job isn't their highest priority. We don't want it to be. We give them leeway. They're allowed to sign off for any school or after-school activities. We make their schedules work. If you can keep your employees happy, they'll stick around."

Kenway Corporation owner Ken Priest II credits his 50 employees' great pride in producing high quality products for allowing the firm to continue to grow as a recognized nationwide leader in its industry.

Kenway's core business is manufacturing fiberglass industrial equipment for the pulp and paper markets, including scrubbers, tanks, pipes, fittings, ducts, flooring, walkways, stacks, motor covers and grating. It also makes composite architectural items such as columns, domes, and modular buildings.

KENWAY

The firm was founded in Palermo in 1947 by Priest's father as a manufacturer of small boats. In the 1960s the company shifted from boat production to making fiberglass industrial products.

In March, however, Kenway signed a contract which will lead to an expansion of the business which at the same time is also a return to its roots. Kenway, based on Riverside Drive, is building boats again, in an agreement with Maritime Skiff Inc. of Massachusetts.

"We're doing it at our current facility right now," Ian Kopp, a Kenway vice president, said of boat building. "But we'll be expanding to do more of it. There is going to be two Kenways under one roof."

DAIRY QUEENS

Arsenault and Paszyc bought the Augusta-area Dairy Queens in 1999. The State and Bangor streets stores close during the winter while the Western Avenue store stays open year round. Their shops specialize in soft serve ice cream, shakes and sundaes as well as ice cream cakes.

They keep in touch with area high school guidance counselors and teachers who recommend honor roll students as potential Dairy Queen employees, a tradition started by the firm's previous owners.

WINGATE

What is now Wingate Landscape Co. started in 1982 as an outgrowth of Wingate-Lathe Oil. Frank Wingate split from the oil business in 1995 and moved the landscape business and nursery to its present, 18-acre site on Outlet Road in Hallowell. Frank does most of the design and layout for projects, Alyssa handles the bookkeeping, and adult-son Blake oversees much of the stonework part of the business.

The company does commercial and residential landscaping and nursery sales and has 15 seasonal employees Wingate describes as craftspeople highly skilled in stonework and landscape installations.

Wingate said nearly all of the employees come back season after season. He noted the company's business has grown by about 125 percent over the last few years, all with the same workforce.

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