



Huntsville business takes off with owner's diverse background

Published: Monday, August 23, 2010, 7:22 AM



Budd McLaughlin, The Huntsville Times



Eric Schultz/The Huntsville Times

Jim Wood, founder of Spiritus, stands in his office in the former downtown Huntsville YMCA.

HUNTSVILLE, AL -- It wasn't exactly the typical path to owning a small defense-contracting business, but Jim Wood isn't your typical small business owner.

Wood graduated with a degree in theater arts and, like most thespian hopefuls, he took that to New York City.

He followed the obligatory career path, which included bartending and waiting on tables, and did some off-Broadway plays.

While taking a walk through lower Manhattan, he visited the aircraft carrier Intrepid and, inspired by the giant ship, he stopped in a Navy recruiting office and inquired about their pilot program - particularly, the F-14 Tomcat. It was about a year-and-a-half after the movie "Top Gun" was released.

Wood was welcomed into the service's officer program but the recruiter - noting the theater degree and his stage

background - tried to dispel any notion that he would make it as a pilot, let alone a "Top Gun" pilot.

"You'll never get in," the recruiter said.

But Wood wouldn't be deterred and graduated from the program, which started with more than 40 prospects and ended with 17 graduates. He was one of just three to be assigned a F-14 Tomcat - which he flew for 10 years.

Now he's taken that diverse background and his company - Spiritus - has just celebrated its 10th anniversary.

The small engineering and software development company has 16 employees, including Wood.

He worked for a local software company that was a subcontractor before striking out on his own.

"I didn't want to be pigeon-holed," Wood, 45, said.

For the last 4 1/2 years, Spiritus has been far from being the sterile, cubicle-oriented small business. The company is on the second floor of the former YMCA downtown, which features hardwood floors and the atmosphere of an old-fashioned office with a huge open area in the center.

Before that, "we were across the street."

After the building was remodeled, "every day I came to work and said 'I want to work there,'" Wood said.

Then, the opportunity arose and his business moved in.

With his creative, theater background, Wood has his employees thinking "conceptually" of ways to help customers, including the likes of the Missile Defense Agency.

"It's not good enough anymore to be strictly technical" and right down the line, he said. "I think you have to pit it in a bigger, broader picture.

"You can take the problems but don't be afraid to ask 'How about this way?' "

He said his programmers view themselves as designers, creators and workflow engineers and he said since the company was started, only two people left.

"One was a woman whose grandchildren lived down at the beach and she just wanted to be a grandmother," he said.

"Another left to start his own business - not a competitor."

Wood said he did have to let someone go a couple of years ago because of budget problems, "but we were able to hire him back" after a few months.

And, he's been able to combine the emotion of acting with the technical skills he learned as a pilot and bring that to the business world.

"We're a thriving company and it's kind of fun," Wood said. "I'm a lucky guy."

Budd McLaughlin can be reached at budd.mclaughlin@htimes.com and 256-532-4527.

© 2010 al.com. All rights reserved.