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TOP STORY

Charleston man gets defensive

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Tad Robinette describes how he loads a memory card from his laptop into a machine at the Robert C. Byrd Institute for his work with Northrop Grumman.

KENNY KEMP | Gazette-Mail

For \$1 a minute — \$60 an hour — Tad Robinette rents a programmable machine that can turn his laptop software into gold. Well, not gold, but a small aluminum part Robinette has turned into a lucrative contract with a weapons manufacturer.

“It’s amazing,” said Robinette of Charleston. He said he is prohibited from revealing either the amount of the contract or exactly what weapon part he will manufacture from one of two Robert C. Byrd Institute shops. “I’m still wrapping my head around it.”

It might have been a long way to the top of rock ‘n’ roll for AC/DC, but Robinette found success quickly in landing the Northrop Grumman contract.

The Robert C. Byrd Institute at Marshall University, with facilities in Huntington and Charleston, can take a large part of the credit for Robinette’s good fortune. He wandered into the institute’s Huntington shop in January 2021, enrolled in a free apprenticeship for veterans and, before long, found himself making pollution-control pieces for an American Electric I

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contractor based nearby.

The Byrd Institute recommended in April that he attend the Small Business Outreach Expo, a U.S. Department of Defense-funded initiative to connect manufacturers in the region to the military supply chain. Robinette's company is called Liberty Hill.

"The Small Business Outreach Expo was pivotal in educating Liberty Hill in the requirements needed to become a supplier," said Derek Scarbro, deputy director of the institute.

After the event, Scarbro said, the institute worked with Robinette to help him land the deal.

The institute covered the first four months of his initial training with a grant and allows him inexpensive rent to produce parts for his own company, Liberty Hill.

It's a good bargain for anyone interested in getting involved in manufacturing, machining and design, said Eddie Webb, director of manufacturing services at the institute.

"You can use our machines for four hours, at \$50 an hour, and spend \$200, instead of trying to buy a \$1 million piece of equipment," Webb said.

A Cabin Creek native and 1979 East Bank High School graduate, Robinette takes advantage of that when producing his parts for Northrop Grumman. He can make 120 pieces in an hour by feeding information from his laptop memory card into a massive machine and adding some programming touches. Before long, aluminum rods at the machine's base are transformed into small, innocuous cogs in a military wheel.

Robinette said Northrop had requested that the part not be photographed or described in detail. The same goes for his contract specifics.

Although his journey from working in his Cabin Creek shop to procuring a defense contract was swift, the 62-year-old Robinette is modest.

"I don't want this to be about me," he said. "It's about hope. If I can do this, anyone can. I'm from Cabin Creek."

He shies away from the title "machinist," saying he is only one by proxy. "Software is the big equalizer." He said young people turned off by traditional "book learning" might find machining by computer appealing because it contains video game components.

In December, Robinette said, he will venture to "Rocket Center," a 16,000-acre Keyser, Mineral County, facility used by Northrop, the U.S. Navy and other corporations. He will continue to produce parts at either the South Charleston or Huntington campuses.

Robinette is classified as service-disabled from his military service from 1979 to 1992 and 12 years in the Los Angeles Police Department. He served as a security policeman in the U.S. Air Force. In the latter capacity, he broke his back, got shot and suffered a stabbing.

“Just not all at the same time,” he joked.

Robinette, Scarbro said, impressed Northrop Grumman honchos with his advanced cybersecurity knowledge. According to an institute news release, Robinette’s company “quickly established all 110 controls of the NIST 800-171 requirements ...” Whatever that means, Northrop Grumman liked it.

Having done and seen a lot in his days, Robinette is looking to spread the wealth. He became the first West Virginian to be awarded a Northrop Grumman contract as a result of the expo. The contractor is looking for other small-business owners to bring into the fold, particularly veterans and minorities.

Robinette has started his own apprentice program, similar to the leg-up he received from the institute. He attempted to train two parolees at the institute’s Huntington shop; one worked out and one didn’t. He said he is undeterred.

Institute spokesman Mike Friel said the cheap rent and other perks are not designed to cut private business off at the knees.

“Our goal is not to compete with private industry but to give people access to the tools and technology to start their own business, or to get the initial sales they need to establish themselves,” Friel said.

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