

# HALL OF FAME

## Innovation ‘Critical Part’ of Kosciusko Brand

George Robertson wanted to know the answer to a pretty significant question: “Why is a small city in Northern Indiana (Warsaw) the Orthopedic Capital of the World?”

When Robertson came on board five years ago as the first full-time executive director of the Kosciusko Economic Development Corporation (KEDCo), he began researching but didn’t have to look far to determine the answer.

“You see it in the stories of the companies, DePuy Synthes, Zimmer Biomet and Dane Miller (founder of Biomet). You see a trend of innovation and entrepreneurship. . . . Why is one of the largest automated material handling companies – CTB Inc. – in Milford? It’s entrepreneurship and innovation. And it just struck me that that was a critical part of our brand,” he emphasizes.

Robertson took his findings to the KEDCo board of directors and told them that to achieve more economic success, you have to celebrate it. The Kosciusko County Entrepreneur and Innovation Hall of Fame was born in 2011, honoring six innovators and companies per year. Taking place in the fall, the annual dinner includes approximately 250 people.

“Business retention is one of the critical goals – our No. 1 goal – and it’s a way of saying thank you to companies too. It’s really not only branding, it’s part of our business retention effort,” Robertson adds.

### Local honor

With the help of a selection committee, companies and individuals are nominated beginning each June. While limited to orthopedics and agriculture in the first year (three winners from each industry), the 2014 program also honored Grace College and Theological Seminary and has included retail and sales companies as well.

Honorees in the first four years include: DePuy (2011); Creighton Brothers (2011); Medtronic (2012); Lake City Bank (2013); The Papers (2013); *Times Union*/Reub Williams and Sons (2014), to name a few.



Seymour Midwest, honored as a 2014 inductee into the Entrepreneur & Innovation Hall of Fame, is the largest tool replacement or repair handle maker in the world, according to company president Bill Henthorn.

One of the 2014 recipients was Seymour Midwest, a 1990 start-up turned multi-million dollar operation with over 300 employees – and customers worldwide. Originally selling a rake that was engineered by its founders, the family-owned company has grown through expansion and acquisition over the years. Today, it sells over 3,500 tools and 8,000 repair handles.

Bill Henthorn acquired one of the founder’s shares of the business in 1996 and has served as president, overseeing the growth and innovation. He, along with the company, was inducted into the Entrepreneur and Innovation Hall of Fame.

“It’s a wise move to be able to promote companies and promote Kosciusko County and let people know ‘here’s the type of companies we have,’” Henthorn acknowledges, noting that the honor was a surprise.

Robertson explains why the Hall of Fame includes the company as well as an individual (or more).

“Typically, when you see Hall of Fames around the country of this type, they will honor the individual who is the entrepreneur, creator, inventor. We thought that it was equally as important to honor the company. Because without a team, without committed employees, the entrepreneur can get it started, but can’t go it alone,” he says.

“We honor that person who was the real creative force in creating the company, but then we honor the company for continuing that tradition.”

When Henthorn stepped in as president, sales were less than \$1 million annually. With its most recent acquisition in 2013 (which brought along the new name – it was originally Midwest Rake Company), sales grew to over \$30 million a year.

“As far as innovation, there have been a lot of different products over the years we’ve added, as we’ve seen a need and the market has changed,” Henthorn shares. “When the company started, the guy I bought out was an engineer. They developed a particular brace that is still being used today and others have copied it on that particular rake. It’s an aluminum wrap-around brace with a handle that makes it more sturdy and more durable.”

### Fruits of labor

Robertson mentions that there are major developments happening in the region, and the Hall of Fame is one more piece to help promote the area’s benefits.

“For instance, recently, Warsaw finally made the *Site Selection* list of Top 20 Developing Communities. In terms of economic development, projects, jobs, top 20 in the country. And we hadn’t been on the list,” he emphasizes. “When I sent out that eNewsletter – I was amazed how many HR directors called me the next day and asked, ‘Can I have the link to that?’”

Though the region and industries are well known, particularly in the orthopedic sector, the area is not exactly the largest or most populated in the state. Are they going to run out of companies and people to honor?

“The first question some board members asked, ‘If we do six a year, are we going to run out soon?’” Robertson recalls.

“But every year, we have 30 or 40 companies and when we look at numbers seven, eight, nine, 10 and those that just barely don’t make it, we sit back and say, ‘Well, we’re set for next year.’ We haven’t run into that (lack of worthy honorees) yet, which is amazing to me.”