

Jean Brigham, foreground, with brother Tony trailing, utilize Ikelite equipment on a diving adventure.

MAKING A SPLASH

Ikelite Leads the Way in Underwater Photography

A few blocks north of the world-famous Indianapolis Children's Museum is a cluster of buildings painted in bright, tropical underwater scenes. It may be hard to believe, but in the landlocked heartland of the United States exists one of the industry leaders in scuba and underwater photography: Ikelite Underwater Systems.

The world headquarters of Ikelite has been thriving as a dive shop (under the name Diver's Supply Company, Inc.) and later an underwater photography supply business since 1962.

Business spirit

Employees of Ikelite are a bit baffled as to how Indiana, given its distance from the ocean, has supported so many thriving communities of divers and underwater photographers. General Manager David Combs believes it may have to do with Indiana's reputation as a great state for industry.

"(The diving community in Indianapolis) has always been strong, and I can't tell you why, other than we have a strong economic base here and good industries," Combs explains.

There's no doubt the company also owes a large portion of its success to Ike Brigham, the founder of the business.

At age 12, Brigham began a business called Ike's Bikes, repairing bicycles. As a teenager, he also refinished furniture. After graduating from Broad Ripple High School, Brigham spent a single semester at

Purdue University before he decided it was time to go back to work. He began running a dive shop in an empty storefront he bought. In addition to selling scuba gear, the shop served as a location for diving certifications for hobbyists and professionals.

"He liked making people happy and interacting with the customer," recalls Jean Brigham, Ike's daughter and Ikelite's president and CEO since December 2006. "And I think all of that was supported by having a group of people as he started out who got really into diving. ... He had that business spirit, and that's what he liked doing. He put his heart and soul in it. He never really took a vacation."

Growing the product line

Though the company has moved on to more sophisticated, computer-generated models of new products, Ikelite still uses molds for some configurations that Ike Brigham created over 40 years ago. Combs says Brigham was a "really smart, common sense kind of guy" who focused on generic models for camera enclosures that could fit a variety of products.

Before developing camera housings, Brigham started by creating a diving flashlight. Back when the company primarily shipped items throughout the country, people began to inquire about "Ike's lights." Thus, the company earned its name, Ikelite, and began shifting from a dive shop to a manufacturing company.

"He continued to build on accessories that were important to him and the people he was diving with," Combs emphasizes. "He said, 'We have the need and nobody is making it, so I guess we will make it.'"

Brigham created an underwater compass that became the industry

standard, followed by camera housings for Kodak instamatics. One camera housing led to another, and Ikelite began catering to movie cameras, underwater lighting, surface strobes and underwater strobes.

Now, Ikelite's most popular products are its line of DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) housings.

"I really enjoy designing the new camera housings because there's a challenge to that," says Mike Rabideau, department supervisor for DSLR, who has been with the company over 28 years. "It's not just sticking them inside a box and making sure they're waterproof. It's making sure the controls are ergonomic. I've been diving longer than I worked here, so I have a good idea of how they should work."

In the company of divers

Rabideau is not alone. Over half of Ikelight's 65 employees are divers and often enjoy their hobby together. Jean Brigham believes that is part of the reason why the company puts out such great products: They know the industry.

"Sometimes it's an HR issue where they go, 'Oh, eight people are going to be gone on this trip – I don't think so,'" she jokes. "We can't shut down this week because people want to go to Grand Cayman."

Jean Brigham was certified to dive before she left home for college. When she came to work in the service department of Ikelite, she began diving with her fellow employees and "got really obsessed with it and started taking photos."

Rabideau and Combs both gained an interest in diving in the 1970s, mainly because of popular programming on television. Jacques Cousteau allowed people to experience underwater exploration through their television. At the time, diving was considered an extreme, dangerous sport. Now, that is not the case.

"Anyone who has an interest (in diving) should do it," Rabideau assures. "With fins on your feet and a tank on your back, you can just float along and see so many things in the ocean it's incredible."

Combs also recalls a trade show he attended with other dive store owners in which they had the chance to preview the movie *Jaws*, which he said really furthered "the excitement, the adventure" of diving at the time.

"Everyone's jaw kind of dropped because we thought, 'This is going to scare everyone,'" Combs recalls, "but it was just the opposite. People saw that movie and started signing up for classes right and left."

Connecting to the neighborhood

Ikelite has grown from its storefront shop of Diver's Supply Company to an operation that eventually took over five separate addresses. The company makes all its products in Indianapolis, so as Ikelight needed more space it began building tunnels between buildings to stay in its original block.

Combs believes if Ikelite continues to rely on local vendors and maximize efficiency in the facilities it already has, there is no reason to move somewhere new.

"The old joke that I used to say is, 'It's not pretty but it's mine,'" Combs laughs, referring to the space Ikelite occupies. "The concept we have to work with is we know what we have, we know how to make it work and things change so readily, it's good to have the spaces we can modify here."

The Children's Museum has also encouraged Ikelight to remain in its current location. Combs says the museum is a "good neighbor," and it contacted Keep Indianapolis Beautiful to paint the underwater diving mural outside the business – complete with a bright orange octopus, the company mascot. Ikelite's employees teamed up with staff from Eli Lilly during Lilly's Day of Service in a team painting effort.

Changing with the tide

Ikelite stays closely tied to its company history and neighborhood roots, but it has undergone significant changes alongside technology upgrades.

The point and shoot digital camera housing sales have declined as more people use smartphones as their primary camera. Ikelite has no current plans to expand into mobile phone housings, mainly because the market moves so quickly.

The GoPro compact, action-based camera, however, has revolutionized the market of water sport photography and caused a spike in sales for mounts and accessories at Ikelite. Jean Brigham says

Company founder Ike Brigham, at work in the 1970s, blended an entrepreneurial spirit with creativity.





Employees and volunteers contributed to painting the murals (photos taken with company equipment) that decorate the exterior of the Ikelite operation in Indianapolis.



that GoPro is almost “part marketing company,” selling a type of lifestyle as well as a product.

“People are wanting to have more of an emotional connection with the products they use,” she describes. “We’ve had to change as a company because the way people do business has changed. There are more people ordering things online, and there is even more direct consumer interaction than ever – even though we’ve always been famous for that.”

One way Ikelite has increased its interaction with customers is through its ambassador program. Ikelite’s ambassadors show unique ways to use the company’s products for everything from diving with manatees to underwater fashion photography. To reflect this versatility, Ikelite has adopted the tagline “anywhere there’s water.”

Ikelite continues to expand its products to a diverse and international community.

“What I find really interesting is we are global,” says service manager Glen Darling, who has worked with Ikelite for three years. “I get to talk with some pretty interesting folks and as far as the diving industry goes, most people are either professional underwater photographers or sports divers who are into photography. They are just good people. They’re interesting people; they’re fun.”

As for the future of the company, Jean Brigham says the biggest challenge will be diversification of Ikelite’s market. Changes in technology are driving that faster than ever before, but Ikelite’s employees are enthusiastic about the possibilities.

“We’ve always made products that allowed people to take their cameras underwater affordably and that (allow them to do) everything the average person needs to do at 200 feet,” Jean Brigham surmises. “We’re coming out with a lot of (products) that we think inspire a lot of things that aren’t traditional underwater photography.”



Sam Abel (top), machine shop supervisor, and DSLR department supervisor Mike Rabideau are part of the Ikelite team that emphasizes innovation and quality.



RESOURCE: Ikelite at www.ikelite.com