

Tough as steel and plenty smart

Outstanding Business Achievement Awards recognize moxy, innovation

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The state of the economy was a hot topic of conversation but didn't detract from celebrating the achievements of Hamilton's businesses last night.

The Hamilton Chamber of Commerce handed out eight awards to businesses at its 25th annual gala ceremony.

"In these tough economic times, the tough get going," chamber president Ruth Liebersbach said in her opening remarks.

"We believe that the companies nominated for the Outstanding Business Achievement awards are great examples of companies that are tough."

Bruno Schirripa, owner of Barton Air Fabrications, was named young entrepreneur of the year.

He was surprised by the nomination and even more surprised to win. But the 35-year-old said the honour really belongs to his hard-working and dedicated staff of just over 50 people.

The North End company designs and fabricates industrial equipment for steel mills, processing plants, mines and pulp and paper mills.

It is also focusing on the rail car industry. In three years, it has doubled in size and more than quadrupled its plant size.

"This is a great honour because I was born and raised in Hamilton," Schirripa told the crowd. "This is great recognition for everyone back at the office and the plant. We will strive to continue to grow and prosper."

Award judge Geoff Green, owner of consulting firm Pegasus Global Initiatives, said Barton Air was chosen for its growth. "They have really got themselves out of a slumping business and exploded."

Barton Air has focused on diversification and quality, said Schirripa. "We are not looking to be the biggest shop around, but we want to be known as the best."

The Pathways Group, which operates an innovative dental practice in Ancaster and Burlington, along with a child care and education academy, was named the top small business.

"It feels good," Pathways owner Dr. Walter Heidary said of the win. "It's an honour for the team that does all the hard work and takes care of every family, patient and child who comes through our doors."

Awards judgeCarolynn Reid, a business development officer with the city's economic development division, says Pathways shows a strong focus on their customers and employees.

Answer Plus, a 55-year-old in-bound call centre operation based in Hamilton, won the communication technology award.

The business, begun in a janitor's closet in downtown Hamilton, now employs about 225 people in Hamilton, St. Catharines, Montreal and Toronto. Answer Plus specializes in emergency response services.

"That could be anything from 'I can't turn on my computer' to 'There's just been a train derailment and there is a chemical spill,'" said company president Paul Lloyd.

His mother began the company in 1961 with \$800 and a used switchboard. "She'd be blown away," Lloyd added.

Cargojet won in the large business category.

The Mississauga-based company employs more than 150 pilots, maintenance engineers, avionics specialists and ground handling staff at Hamilton International Airport.

The acclaimed winner of the manufacturing and export excellence award is Anderson Water Systems of Dundas.

The company engineers, designs and manufactures water treatment equipment for a wide range of industries.



Cathie Coward, the Hamilton Spectator

The 57-year-old company has more than 3,000 systems installed in 40 countries and employs 80 people.

The Ironman award, recognizing local businesses operating for at least 15 years, was presented to Pearson Dunn Insurance.

The not-for-profit/social enterprise award went to the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum.

Starward Homes was inducted into the chamber's century honour roll.

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