

## ■ APOGEE ENGINEERED CERAMICS

# City firm found way to grow despite economy

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A few years ago, Margaret Tipping faced a bleak future that is all too familiar for many local residents.

The Saint-Gobain Advanced Ceramics plant in Brantford where she had worked for most of her adult life was closing. She and more than 30 others would be out of work.

"It was looking pretty bad," Tipping said. "I'd worked there for 30 years and I was in my 50s.

"Who was going to hire me? I needed a job but really who was going to hire me at that stage in my life, especially when there were so many factory closings."

Now 60, Tipping is still working at pretty much the same job she's always done. She works for Apogee Engineered Ceramics in Brantford, a company that was formed to fill the niche in the market when Saint-Gobain closed its city plant.

Saint-Gobain still has a plant in Paris. The company's former Brantford facility was initially opened in the late 1940s and, for many years, was known as Hamilton Porcelains.

Apogee was started by Robert Ico and Clint Murray, two former managers at Saint-Gobain's former Brantford plant.

"I just put my faith in Robert and Clint and here I am." Tipping said. "I'm still

to severance, it would also have to pay for some environment assessments on the property.

So, Ico offered the owners another option. He offered to buy the operation.

There was a lot of discussion but no deal was reached.

A determined Ico began thinking about forming his own company. He talked to others at the plant to see if they would join him. That talk led to Ico finding himself unemployed.

"At that time, my wife and I were building a house," Ico said. "So, on the day I got fired, I go home and she says, 'Look honey, we've got the keys -the house is finished.'

"And I said, 'look honey, I've been terminated'."

Angry and frustrated, Ico decided to put his energy and time into something positive. He moved forward with his plans to set up his own plant.

When the Saint-Gobain plant closed, he went to the public auction of equipment and purchased what he needed for his new venture -Apogee.

Ico is the president and CEO of Apogee, while Murray, who has international experience in setting up plants, is the operations manager.

"Basically, we started off with four people," Ico said. "They worked for us without pay because they believed in us -they believed that Clint and I could get this off the ground.

"We also had a silent part-

working and I really like it here. I like working for them.”

Specializing in infrared plaques, custom refractory, foundry products and technical ceramics, Apogee occupies about 25,000-square-feet at 396 Henry St. The company’s products are used to heat industrial and commercial buildings as well as spot heating, commercial food broiling and cooking.

The products can be found in space heaters, such as the kind that are used by campers, as well as high-end appliances and barbecues.

Apogee was formed at a time when plants in Brantford were closing, the global economic meltdown was just about to begin and money was about to become really tight.

Ico said that both he and Murray knew the Saint-Gobain plant was going to close. “But I really felt that it didn’t need to close...that there was a market for the products and that it could be a viable business.”

Ico knew the company would have to spend money to close the plant. In addition

we also had a silent partner -Ed Slifierz -who helped us get started.”

Apogee now employs 25 people. The company attributes its success to a dedicated workforce, customer service and diversification into additional product lines.

The company works hard to get contracts and just as hard to hold onto them, Ico said.

Apogee also has hired some younger people, including 27-year-old Tobias Nieminen, a University of Waterloo engineering graduate.

“I’m kind of the new guy here,” Nieminen said. “I’ve only been here for three months.

“But the reason I came here is because it’s a nice-sized company with enormous potential. The morale here is really good, too and everyone works as a team.”

“We’ve been lucky,” Ico said. “We started out with something like four people ... people who were willing to work without pay because they believed in us and believed that we could get this off the ground.”