

BUSINESS

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After dropping out of the University of Hartford in 1983, Tim Loughran found himself bored silly managing a convenience store in an affluent Connecticut town.

A regular customer making his usual stop for coffee and a pack of smokes talked with Loughran one day. Then in his early 20s, Loughran told the older man he wasn't going anywhere selling coffee and cigarettes.

The customer owned an advertising agency, which had a client that built cleanroom facilities used by high-tech companies. The man got Loughran an inside sales job at the contractor, and since then, it's the only business the 44-year-old knows.

Loughran is managing partner of cleanroom construction company AdvanceTEC in Chesterfield County. The firm's 21 employees have built facilities across the U.S., many in Maryland and North Carolina. Projects in Virginia are few, but this month the company began its first local job at PPD Inc., a medical contract research firm in Richmond.

Cleanrooms are controlled environments that reduce the amounts of foreign particles in the air, refreshing the room hundreds of times an hour. A typical office filters the air about a dozen times hourly, Loughran said.

"The person who doesn't know anything about cleanrooms would say, 'Like a hospital operating room?' Nah, in cleanroom terms that's dirty," he explains. "You're filtering particles essentially 100 times smaller than what the naked eye can see."

Semiconductor manufacturers such as Qimonda in eastern Henrico County work in cleanrooms so the computer chips it makes can become smaller and faster by maintaining a low level of foreign particles that can damage the microscopic circuitries. Drug makers use cleanrooms to keep sterile pills and medicines clear of foreign substances so they don't find their way into a human body.

It was Qimonda -- formerly Infineon and White Oak before that -- that brought New Yorkers Loughran and John Burton to the Richmond area in 1996.

They were employees with Performance Contracting Inc., which opened a Henrico office to build the interior walls, ceilings and floors at that plant.

Performance planned to help build a second semiconductor factory in Goochland County, a project later abandoned. The men were asked to move from Richmond on to the next business opportunity.

Wasn't gonna happen.

So the two started their own company in March 2000.

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"It was six days from the first conversation to, 'We're quitting our jobs and we're off on our own,'" said Loughran, an avid writer and engineer's son.

He and Burton each plunked \$5,000 into the venture, and AdvanceTEC remains free from the hands of outside investors and debt.

They didn't have a business plan, but they had local contacts and a combined 25 years of cleanroom-building expertise. The men have since blossomed AdvanceTEC into a \$21 million company catering to the microelectronics and biotechnology industries.

Cleanroom costs -- and the pricey instrumentation that goes inside of them -- prove to be prohibitive for most small biotech companies, which are already investing heavily in product development.

To avoid the expense, these firms -- several in central Virginia -- typically partner with a contract manufacturer or larger pharmaceutical company, organizations that can afford and provide the space.

Despite not drumming up much local business, AdvanceTEC has made a name for itself elsewhere -- though more contracts in the Richmond region wouldn't hurt for the company or area, said Faith McClintic, development manager at Meadowville Technology Park in Chesterfield.

"We're working together in the region to build up business here so that companies like AdvanceTEC can stay at home a little bit more and generate revenue locally instead of having to go out of town," said McClintic, who has worked closely with Loughran to keep him in the loop on development the Richmond area.

Loughran expects his business to boom in coming years as money directed at small-scale nanotechnology research fuels an eventual need for commercial production facilities.

He considers himself AdvanceTEC's business smarts, pointing to Burton as his polar opposite and guy with the techno-brains.

"We disagree on everything in the world," Loughran said smiling, noting they can agree on the right projects for their company to take. "We drive each other crazy, but it's probably what makes us a successful partnership."

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