

Company displays a certain flair for foam

Harbor Foam gets orders from industry — and artists and moviemakers.

Pete Daly
Grand Rapids Business Journal

Ryan Van Dyke knows there's no business like show business — especially when Harbor Foam's product shows up on the big screen and on the front page of newspapers.

A lot of people have already seen the Grandville company's product bigger than life, and probably many more will see it when the re-make of "Red Dawn" is released. They just won't recognize it.

Take "Nessie," for example, the acclaimed sea serpent sculpture that made a startling appearance on the Grand River in downtown Grand Rapids during ArtPrize: "That's our foam," said Van Dyke, sales/new product development manager at the young company.

Harbor Foam, which has about eight employees, expands tiny polystyrene pellets into large blocks to customer specifications. The foam is then cut and shaped for a variety of uses, ranging from construction insulation to packaging containers and inserts. The best-known brand of expanded polystyrene (EPS) is Styrofoam from Dow Chemical Co.

"A lot of sculptors and artists like to work with it," noted Van Dyke. That's why David Valdiseri called Harbor Foam a few months ago to order enough EPS to make "Nessie on the Grand," an ArtPrize entry that may have been the most photographed work in the city-wide show. Val-

diseri is an industrial designer and one of several collaborators who competed for the ArtPrize, calling themselves the Airline Aluminum Group.

Very large pieces of EPS were glued together, then sculpted by the team of artists using sanders and a special tool loaned by Harbor Foam, a hot-wire blade designed to smoothly cut EPS.

Then there is the remake of "Red Dawn," a 1984 action movie that starred Patrick Swayze and Charlie Sheen fighting Soviet paratroopers who land in their Midwestern town and begin shooting it up as part of the commies' attempt to conquer the U.S.A. The new version was shot this summer in several locations in and around Detroit. It stars Josh Hutcherson and Chris Hemsworth — and a cave made of EPS provided by Harbor Foam.

Van Dyke — and Rick Hert of the West Michigan Film Office — heard that some fake military vehicles were also made from Harbor Foam EPS for the movie. Polystyrene can be expanded to different densities, depending on how it will be used. A cubic foot of raw polystyrene pellets weighs about 40 pounds, according to Van Dyke.

"We can expand it to a (finished) weight of one pound per cubic foot," he said — which is why all those vehicles go flying through the air in the movies and we never hear about real people getting squashed.

Some fake concrete highway dividers were also made from Harbor Foam product for the movie, according to Van Dyke. When asked how much EPS the movie producer bought, Van Dyke would only say "a fair amount."

Harbor Foam was launched in



RYAN VAN DYKE FINDS plenty of applications for Harbor Foam's product lines, including work with artists and moviemakers. Photo by Michael Buck

June 2007 by Van Dyke and his sister, Laura Kuperus, and their mother, Pat Van Dyke. All three own and manage the company as partners. The family has EPS in their blood — figuratively speaking. Pat Van Dyke's father, Floyd Johnson, founded Michigan Foam in Byron Center back in the early 1960s and she worked there as secretary. Ryan Van Dyke and his sister also worked there.

Remember bean bag chairs? Van Dyke will never forget them.

"I'm sure everybody had about three of them," he joked. He knows them well because as a kid, his part-time job at the factory was to "turn the skins." The skins — the plastic fabric — came from China, where the sheets were sewn together into a spherical shape with a small opening. Of course, the seams could only be sewn together from the outside, so the "skins" arrived inside-out; Van Dyke's job was to reverse them so that the stitching was on the inside and the finished exterior on the outside. Then the spheres were filled with EPS.

"I'd sit there and turn them all day long," he recalled, not too wistfully.

Harbor Foam got going with the help of a 12-year, 50 percent

personal property tax abatement granted by the city of Grandville.

Harbor Foam occupies part of a 215,000-square-foot plant at 2950 Prairie St. SW. The building had been home to J.L. French, a Wisconsin-based die-cast machine company that moved out in 2003.

Harbor Foam's output is now in excess of a half-million pounds of expanded polystyrene; Van Dyke won't reveal the actual number because he doesn't want the competition to know.

"We do everything from pole barn installations to disposable head rests for morticians," said Van Dyke.

"Nowadays you have got to be very diversified," he added.

While movie props are obviously a very small part of the company's business, any business is good business in Michigan in this economy. Van Dyke's hope is that it will grow, he said, noting "all the movie buzz" that can be heard around Michigan.

"Hopefully, Michigan keeps up the tax break for these guys," he said, in reference to the 40-to-42 percent refundable tax credit Michigan offers movie productions shot in the state.