

Tony Winick was disappointed

when, fresh out of college, he couldn't find a job with an accounting firm.

He now thinks part of his brain was telling him that he belonged in his parents' business, not in a CPA office.

"My subconscious was saying, 'This is where I want to be,'" Winick said. "Growing up with two parents who work for themselves, you are aware of the benefits and also of the trials. But it's hard to imagine yourself doing anything else."

That fateful job search was 12 years ago. These days, Winick gradually is taking over the management of Aero Assemblies Inc., a Burnsville company that specializes in assembling eyelets, grommets and cables.

In the family

Winick descends from a long line of entrepreneurs. His paternal grandfather founded Aero-Space Computer Supplies Inc. of Bloomington as well as Aero Assemblies. His mother owned her own pharmacy in the Philippines and met his father, Dave Winick, when he served in the Peace Corps.

Dave and Tranquilina Winick eventually settled in the Twin Cities and worked for his father. In 1983, Tranquilina Winick purchased Aero Assemblies, and the couple built the tiny company into a full-fledged business that posted \$3.4 million in sales in the last fiscal year.

One of Aero Assemblies' first successes was Garment Guard, a familiar sight to shoppers in the '80s. A Garment Guard cable kept an item of clothing — usually something expensive like a leather jacket — attached to the hanger while allowing the customer to try it on.

The Winicks also expanded from just distributing eyelets to assembling them as well.

"People already were buying the eyelets, but the smaller companies needed them placed into the products," Winick said. "So we do both."

Eyelets are items no one ever thinks about, but the tiny metal and plastic rings are ubiquitous. The cardboard wheel you use to predict a baby's due date or choose a wine to match your dinner? The center is held together with an eyelet that allows the wheel to spin. The string-and-button closures on the folders you received at that trade show? An eyelet holds those fasteners in place.

Custom eyelet work, from tags and posters to book bindings, is one of the company's most profitable industries, Winick said. He employs 19 full- and part-time workers and contracts additional help for large orders.

"It's a very reactive industry," Winick said. "We often have to put together 100,000 pieces on short notice."

Cable assemblies are another major part of Aero Assemblies' business, and the warehouse is filled with lengths of cable des-

An eye for eyelets

Winick family carves niche in hardware, cables | by Jessica Griffith, Contributing writer



Aero Assemblies Inc.

Specializes in eyelet, grommet and cable assemblies

Headquarters: Bloomington

Founded: 1972

Employees: 19

Revenue: \$3.4 million in 2002

tinged for garage doors, exercise machines and playground equipment.

As a small company, the manufacturer specializes in custom work and individual attention to its customers.

"The unique thing they do for us is they have taken it upon themselves to hold inventory for us, which frees up inventory dollars for me," said Rob Warren, materials manager at Engineered Products Co., a Plymouth company that sells electrical components to distributors.

The products Warren buys from Aero

Assemblies come from overseas, and the company's willingness to hold inventory reduces Warren's lead time from three to six weeks to two days.

Next in line

Winick first began learning the business in high school, when he worked in the warehouse.

"Math and accounting came easily to me, so I began helping my mother in the front office," he said.

After graduating from Burnsville High School in 1987, Winick earned a bachelor's degree in accounting from the University of Illinois. He returned to the family business as controller, a title he has held ever since.

That will change later this summer. Winick's mother, now semi-retired, plans to exit the business entirely. His father Dave is still vice president, and comes in to work

Tony Winick found himself drawn to the family business, Aero Assemblies, instead of the accounting profession for which he had studied. Now he's becoming president.

from time to time. Winick has managed the company for the past three years and will take an ownership position and the title of president. His cousin and one of his brothers also own shares of the business.

"Our first goal is to get through the succession smoothly," he said. "We're the dominant eyeleter in the region, and we want to expand that reach to the five-state area and continue onward."

Tranquilina Winick said she encountered some difficulties as a female minority business owner in the early '80s. At one point, she arranged for an executive mentor from a large Twin Cities company.

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"He just looked at me like, 'You don't know what you are doing,'" she recalled. "He saw I had a Caucasian husband and looked at me like, 'Are you sure you are working for the company?'"

"It was a challenge to show them I could do it," she said.

In the early '90s, she worked on a business plan with help from the Metropolitan Economic Development Association (MEDA), a Minneapolis nonprofit organization that assists minority-owned companies. This helped boost corporate growth to 20 percent annually.

Now Aero Assemblies is well-established and customers know they can receive qual-

ity work, Tony Winick said.

He volunteers with MEDA and works on the organization's annual gala. But Aero Assemblies does not participate in any supplier diversity programs at larger companies, because it is a second-tier supplier. This means Aero Assemblies often is pro-

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—Tony Winick

viding assembled products to other suppliers, who sell them to the end user.

"The best intentions of the large companies are often met by us but not known by them," Winick said.

The biggest challenge for minority companies in the Twin Cities is the relatively

small number of minority-owned businesses in the metro area, he said. Minority companies need to build a strong community, and that is a challenge when you don't have a critical mass.

While larger cities such as New York and Chicago have minority business communities that can make a real impact, Minneapolis-St. Paul is not there yet, Winick added.

"The Minnesota economy could be better represented by people of color," he said. "The population is more diverse than it once was, and it is only reasonable to assume commerce, large and small, should roughly equal the population. Otherwise, what you are facing is a large group of people left permanently underfoot." ■