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## Driving Yankee Innovation

By Stewart Lytle, Reporter

AMESBURY – Taking a drive to Maine over the holidays can be fun. But if you are in the cab of an 18-wheeler, it can be a something more than a leisurely outing.

Andrew Amigo, CEO of Blackburn Energy, needed to chalk up some long-haul miles to collect data on his RelGen technology that captures kinetic energy from the truck's brakes, converts it to electricity and stores it in batteries for various uses.

Amigo and President Peter Russo were just awarded a patent on the technology and sold their first five units to a New York trucking firm. But being a new product on the market, they need more data to convince the trucking industry that this new technology will save the companies money and upgrade the working conditions for their drivers.

Andrew, whose father taught him to drive an 18-wheeler, often uses Blackburn's truck to pick up his children from hockey practice. And on a peak holiday grocery shopping day his wife, Ruth, sent him in the truck to Market Basket where he parked the cab in the crowded parking lot.

So Ruth thought nothing of it when her husband proposed they drive the truck to Maine. She knitted while he drove, stopping only to call their five children to check the computer to report on how much energy Mom and Dad were creating.

It has been a long road for the Amigos since he quit his job as an attorney to prove that he could build a device that would capture energy in a new way to give trucks additional power. Trucks and especially truck drivers need more electricity than the standard batteries can store to make the cab more comfortable overnight, running heat and air conditioning, televisions and computers.

Truckers now make their cabs comfortable in summer and winter by

idling the large diesel or electric engine. But idling burns expensive fuel and illegally pollutes the air, and the law in 31 states prohibit the idling of trucks.

They also need additional power for tasks like running lift gates without draining their batteries.

After years of working on little money in small quarters at CI Works in Amesbury, Amigo proved the concept. But he turned the corner as a business only when he met Peter Russo. Sales had been scarce because, as Russo explained, trucking companies do not readily embrace innovation.

Amigo met Russo when he was dragged to a consulting session at the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Mass MEP), which was created to help start-up companies overcome obstacles to their growth.

Russo, a highly successful inventor of toys and other products, had joined the Mass MEP as its innovation director at the request of the legendary entrepreneur Jack Healy, who built the Legos and Beech Nut business empires. Together they helped Massachusetts small and medium-sized manufacturers.

Out of 150 companies Russo advised, Blackburn and Amigo stood out. He was so impressed he not only invested his own money in the company and raised other funds from friends and clients, but he also became Blackburn's unpaid president.



From left: Craig Nathan, Peter Russo and Andrew Amigo.

Photo provided by Blackburn Energy

Russo was a perfect fit for Blackburn. "It's a good business," he said. "And it leverages a large percentage of my expertise and experience." It is the first startup business he has worked with that he did not originate the idea.

Amigo and Russo bonded in part because they shared the mutual pain and suffering of being struggling entrepreneurs. There have been times Andrew and Ruth were so broke they put their home in Essex up for sale. Russo recounted the time, before his inventions began to sell, that he, his wife and three children lived in an un-winterized two-bedroom New England home.

Russo's resume is unique. Born in Bedford, he joined Quaker Oats and Fisher Price after graduating from college with finance and marketing degrees. Working nights and weekends, he indulged his passion for inventing toys.

Unlike most inventors who stop when they sell a prototype, Russo also created the supply chain to manufacture each of his products and marketed them to major retailers like Wal Mart.

At one time he had 700 products on Wal Mart shelves. He has created more than 2,000 different products, many of

which still pay him royalties.

For Blackburn, he helped Amigo upgrade his device to the stringent, automotive-grade standards and taught Andrew how machine shops and other suppliers work.

"Startups are a horrible client," Russo said. "They take up a lot of time." And time is the most precious commodity for machine shops.

He also kept Blackburn in Massachusetts.

While others advised Amigo to go to China to get his device manufactured, Russo introduced him to an ISO 9001 certified machine shops not just in Massachusetts, but one that was a half mile from Andrew's home.

Together they built a supply chain that is entirely within the state, another of Russo's passions -- to nurture a Massachusetts community of strong manufacturers, who help one another. A board member of the business incubator, Greentown Labs in Somerville, Russo believes there is no better time to be a startup manufacturing company here.

"The resources for manufacturers in Massachusetts are amazing," he said.

That includes universities, like MIT, but it also is informal manufacturing environments, like CI Works, that Russo calls "Yankee innovation." CI Works on Chestnut Street houses dozens of manufacturers which often collaborate with one another to solve problems and advance their products.

For Blackburn, the next three months will involve more data gathering and building company infrastructure like a sales force and a customer service department. Its suppliers can produce up to 300 of the RelGen units per month.

And they hope that with more than a million trucks needing the energy their device captures, 2019 will see the first miles on the road to bringing RelGen innovation to the long-haul trucking industry.

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