NEW MEXICO BUSINESS WEEKLY

Face of Business

McNally: A true belief in passion, perseverance

New Mexico Business Weekly - February 23, 2007 by Kevin Robinson-Avila NMBW Staff

Jim McNally is at the height of his 30-year career as an optics engineer.

tobyjorrin.com
Jim McNally
View Larger

As President and CEO of TruTouch Technologies Inc., McNally is earning national recognition as a cutting-edge innovator whose company could offer the first effective control for drunken driving.

In November, Time magazine called the TruTouch 1100 -- a device that detects intoxication with a flash of light -- one of the best innovations of 2006. McNally and Albuquerque-based TruTouch have been profiled in some of the world's biggest newspapers, including The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, USA Today and France's Le Monde.

But no matter how impressive his achievements, McNally says his success can be chiseled down to just three words -- passion, planning and perseverance.

"I call them the 'Three Ps,'" McNally says. "Passion for what you do, solid planning at all times, and perseverance in the face of challenges and set backs."

Those who know him say McNally's passion is infectious. Terry Huertaz, state executive director for Mothers Against Drunk Driving, says TruTouch's innovative technology and McNally's dogged perseverance in bringing it to market have given her hope, for the first time, that drunk driving can be controlled.

"Jim is a true visionary," Huertaz says. "The first time I ever heard the words 'eliminate' and 'drunk driving' in the same sentence was at a press conference with him about the new technology. It made me take a step back, but then it made me realize that just maybe this can be done."

Kim Sanchez Rael, a general partner with Flywheel Ventures and a member of the TruTouch board of directors, says McNally is a top-notch leader who inspires people.

"He has a real passion for what he does," Sanchez says. "It's not just a business for him, it's about doing good things for people. That's an inspiration to everybody involved."

As a 20-year Air Force veteran who reached lieutenant colonel before retiring in 1996, McNally is no stranger to challenges and perseverance. He entered the military as an officer in 1976 after earning a bachelor's degree in engineering from Manhattan College -- where he graduated summa cum laude -- and a master's degree from the University of California at Santa Barbara.

While in the military, McNally led some of the Air Force's top research projects. At Hanscom Air Force Base in Massachusetts from 1976-1981, McNally helped develop precision radar-guided missiles and worked on a ground-based radar system that could detect the launch of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles from Europe or Asia.

He worked as a physics professor and researcher from 1981-1989 at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. While there, he participated in research on super-conducting materials directed by Paul Chu, a nationally acclaimed physics leader who was later profiled on the cover of Time. The Academy research contributed to huge technological advances in a number of fields, including medical devices and transportation technology. McNally received the Air Force Academy Award as top researcher for 1988.

While at the Academy, McNally earned a Ph.D. in optical engineering from the University of New Mexico, making him the first person to earn a doctoral degree in that field from UNM.

He transferred to the Air Force Research Laboratory at Kirtland Air Force Base in 1990, where he worked on three projects -- a satellite-based laser system, an airborne laser defense system, and construction of a four-meter optical telescope in Maui, Hawaii.

McNally says the $150 million telescope project marked the highlight of his military career.

"I led that project," McNally says. "It was the largest optical telescope system ever developed by the Defense Department. It provided significant enhancement to U.S. capacity for ground-based space surveillance."

After retiring from the Air Force in 1996, McNally joined SVS -- an Albuquerque-based defense contractor that specialized in imaging systems and lasers. SVS was later bought by Boeing Co. (NYSE: BA), but during the two years that McNally worked there as vice president of operations, he helped build company revenue from $5 million to $11 million and helped double the workforce from 50 to 110 people.

Then, in 1998, the future came calling. The founders of Rio Grande Medical Technology recruited him as company vice president to assist in developing a revolutionary device that could diagnose diabetes with light rays rather than blood tests.

The company soon changed its name to InLight Solutions Inc. and then spun out four new optics companies based on technology developed by McNally and his colleagues. The spin-offs include VeraLight **Inc.to** diagnosis diabetes, Lumidigm Inc. to verify a person's identification, Luminous Inc. to monitor a patient's progression during and after surgery, and TruTouch Technologies to detect the consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

McNally and two partners -- Ben Ver Steeg and Trent Ridder -- formed TruTouch in January 2005. The company launched with about $1 million in start-up funds that included seed money from InLight and personal investments by the three partners.

Trutouch later received a $2.4 million venture capital investment from Flywheel Ventures, Verge, New Mexico Community Capital and Fort Washington Capital Partners. In December, TruTouch received a second round of investment, but the company has not disclosed the amount it raised.

Last year, TruTouch molded its technology into a marketable prototype. The device, which cradles a person's arm, shoots a tiny flash of infrared light at the skin. The light detects intoxication levels within 60 seconds, eliminating the need for time-consuming and invasive blood, urine or breath tests.

The company rolled out its product for the first time in early February at the American Probation and Parole Association's annual meeting in Atlanta. McNally says the Atlanta launch marks the first of many trade-show promotions aimed at four target markets -- probation services, DWI courts, prison release programs and residential treatment facilities.

"We'll start ramping up production in the next few months," McNally says. "The initial units will be built in-house, but we're negotiating with a potential partner to manage large-scale production later on. The goal is to produce 50 to 100 devices per month by 2008."

McNally plans to upgrade the TruTouch 1100 to make a version compatible with inter-lock devices for cars. Current inter-locks depend on breath analyzers to keep people convicted of DWI from operating a vehicle, but convicts can sidestep that system by asking another person to breathe into it.

The TruTouch device, however, eliminates that glitch because the light ray can identify the person being tested for intoxication. It's that innovation that has McNally and anti-DWI activists like Huertaz enthusiastic about TruTouch technology's ability to control dunk driving.

"I think this technology will be embraced nationally," Huertaz says. "Jim is helping to put Albuquerque on the map. This could raise New Mexico from its dismal state record as one of the worst states for drunk driving to the state that leads the world in controlling DWI."

krobinson-avila@bizjournals.com | 348-8302