

Hardy Diagnostics is SM Valley's top business

Chamber honors its best

By Brian Bullock/Staff Writer bbullock@santamariatimes.com | Posted: Wednesday, August 17, 2011 12:15 am



When Jay Hardy began the operation that has grown into Hardy Diagnostics in 1980, he had modest goals — produce a quality product and grow the company enough to make a comfortable living.

Mission accomplished.

“We were just looking for a way to pay the bills out of training,” Hardy said when asked if he envisioned the growth of his company.

Hardy Diagnostics, which designs and manufactures culture media used to detect and identify microorganisms such as *E. coli*, salmonella, staph and streptococcus, is now the third largest such company in the United States, and it's success has earned it the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce's Business of the Year award.

The company, along with VTC Enterprises and Santa Maria City Manager Tim Ness, will be honored tonight at the chamber's 92nd annual Installation and Awards Dinner at the Santa Maria Elks Lodge.

Thirty-one years ago, Hardy and a partner, both of whom trained as clinical laboratory scientists at Cottage Hospital in Santa Barbara, founded the company with the hospital as its only client. Since then, Hardy said they have grown in steps — from countywide to nationwide.

In 1991, the company moved to Santa Maria, where it still manufactures all of its products.

Last year marked the third year in a row Hardy Diagnostics was recognized as one of the 5,000 fastest growing companies over the first three-quarters of the year by Inc. magazine.

The company employs 180 people, most at its 78,000-square-foot campus on West McCoy Lane, and it makes more than

3,500 products for microbiology testing and more than 12,000 products total.

Hardy Diagnostics serves more than 6,000 laboratories through North America, and is gaining clients in the food-processing business.

“The industrial side is becoming a big part of our business,” Hardy said. “Food processors screen for bacterial pathogens. There's nothing new about it, but companies are becoming more aware and beefing up their testing processes.”

The company is also an active supporter of community activities, regularly donating to the Salvation Army, Boys and Girls Club of the Santa Maria Valley, Good Samaritan Shelter, Santa Maria Valley YMCA and many other local organizations.

Another award his company recently received is a Fit and Friendly Business award presented by the American Heart Association.

“We're pretty proud of that because we're the first on the Central Coast to get it,” he said.

Citizen of the Year

The Santa Maria Council for Retarded Children was formed in 1961 by a group of parents seeking life-skills training opportunities for their kids.

The organization has grown into Vocational Training Center Enterprises, which offers life- and job-skills training to developmentally disabled individuals at its Santa Maria campus.

The organization also has work training sites at more than 40 businesses around the Central Coast, Vandenberg Air Force Base and Naval Base Ventura County.

Since moving to its A Street location, when it served 70 people, its annual budget has grown from \$450,000 to \$10 million, with 65 percent of it derived from business services such as bulk mailing, packaging and duplicating, custom catering and custodial and grounds keeping services.

The chamber award is not the first for VTC. In 1990, VTC was selected as Community Based Program of the Year by the Department of Rehabilitation. In 2006, Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee chose the organization as his district's Small Business of the Year.

In 2008, it received a first place National Scholar Award for Workplace Innovation and Design. And this year it was recognized as 4th District Service Organization of the Year by the county Commission for Women.

“Actually this one was quite unexpected. My first thought was ‘Citizen of the Year,’ how does that work?” Chief Executive Officer Kirk Spry said with a laugh. “But I guess its been awarded to businesses on three occasions — the Elks Lodge and Marian Medical Center have also received the award. To be an organization that’s counted among that elite company is very nice.”

Tim Ness

Santa Maria has grown a lot since Ness went to work for the city in 1989 as its assistant manager, and he’s been responsible for much of that growth as its top administrator for the past 16 years.

His work at the city earned him the chamber’s Robert F. Grogan Award for Public Service.

During his tenure as city manager, Ness helped secure State Water for the city. He also oversaw construction of the main library and its parking structure, the Abel Maldonado Community Youth Center, two new fire stations, a new transit center and expansion of the wastewater treatment plant.

Since he became city manager, Santa Maria has received certificates of achievement for excellence in reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association and has been recognized by the California Society of Municipal Finance Officers.