

Fast-growing firm makes bone screws, pins, drills

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by Maria Burnham

More than 6,000 screws, drills and wires a day are produced in a 30,000-square-foot facility on Collins just east of East Parkway.

But this manufacturing facility isn't building parts for the auto or home building industry, it's building parts for the human body.

Onyx Medical, founded in 1990, supplies the nuts and bolts, so to speak, of the orthopedic trauma industry.

The company has as clients most of the larger orthopedic companies, including Stryker and DePuy, a division of Johnson & Johnson. Their products are shipped all over the world under those companies' names.

"It's great to work in an industry where you put people back together again, every day," said Jodie Gilmore, vice president of sales and marketing for Onyx.

Even as orthopedic companies begin focusing more and more attention on biologics -- drugs or other treatments made from human or animal proteins -- the need for the old-line parts suppliers continues to grow.

Onyx has seen a 20 percent year-over-year growth for the last seven years; faster than the industry average, Gilmore said.

"Organizations like Onyx are great to have in this community and are an example of the vibrancy of the Memphis orthopedic and musculoskeletal industry," said Steve Bares, president and executive director of the Memphis Bioworks Foundation.

The orthopedics industry has always been very dependent on smaller contract manufacturers like Onyx, Bares said. They provide the drills, screws, guide pins and other fixation devices that help place and hold the primary implants in place.

Onyx focuses on production of wires, guide pins, half pins, drills and screws for trauma injuries - - those caused by accidents like car wrecks, as opposed to wear and tear.

The company was founded in 1990 when Laraine and Roger Gilmore bought a pre-existing company that dealt in both trauma parts and soft products (splints, braces and supports). They narrowed the company's product offering and began growing.

Since there are a limited number of companies that need its services, Onyx plans to start expanding its offering within trauma, hoping to pull market share away from its competitors, said Patrick Gilmore, vice president of manufacturing and engineering.

Onyx wants to start developing more complicated parts and start earlier in the design process, helping prototype new products for the companies it serves, he said.

The most difficult challenge for the company is finding good employees, Jodie Gilmore said.

"We've really had to be creative in how we find our talent," she said.

Onyx looks for people with the aptitude and ability to learn new skills and train them for the specific job openings.

One of the ways it attracts people is by offering free health care to employees. The company also has a nine-hour workday, so that employees can have every other Friday off.

As the company prepares to add a second production shift, finding good employees will continue to be its biggest problem.

But, Gilmore added, as the need follows an increase in business, in a way it is a good problem to have.

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