

Brian Pettey - RobotZone

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Boeing. General Motors. MIT. McDonnell Douglas. U.S. Air Force. Lockheed Martin. Raytheon. NBC SE. Microsoft. U.S. Army. Carnegie Mellon. Ford Motor Company. That's not a bad client list. In fact, it reads like some of the leaders in technology worldwide. Today we'll meet a Kansas company whose innovative work in robotics is helping serve these major industries and more. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Brian Pettey is CEO and founder of RobotZone in Winfield, Kansas. Brian spent his early years in the Leavenworth/Lansing area of Kansas before his family moved to Illinois. "I grew up playing with Legos, and I liked adding things to make them move," Brian said. He moved back to Kansas to attend Winfield's Southwestern College as had his parents.

One day in 1995, Brian got a call in his dorm room. It was from his old junior high school teacher in Illinois. His teacher said, "I remember you were building things like electric cars all the time back in junior high. We are on a push to incorporate technology into the classroom, and I wonder if you would build a robot or something that would demonstrate technology for the school."

Brian took on this challenge to build a prototype of a robot for his old school. It went so well that neighboring teachers in Illinois wanted one also, and Brian could see it developing into a business. Then Brian got to thinking that, if teachers in Illinois would want these products, maybe teachers in Kansas would as well. He went to the library, got a list of school addresses, and mailed out flyers. Sure enough, Kansas teachers were interested. That was the beginning of the business known as RobotZone, founded in a dorm room at Southwestern College.

After Brian did a number of robot demonstrations around the state, some teachers at Wellington suggested he go to the tech fair at Pittsburg, and so Brian did. He had an appointment to meet with two teachers at the tech fair, but as he went down the hall people started asking him about the robot that he was carrying. They followed him to the classroom where he was to have the meeting. Instead of two teachers, there were more than 60 in the room when he started his demonstration. In response to market demand, RobotZone began to grow.

Robotic systems for the education market was the first niche for the company, but demand grew into other sectors as well. Today, RobotZone focuses on designing and manufacturing various products for the medical, industrial, military, and factory automation industries.

Robotzone.com is the company website. The company's robots use lots of remote controlled actuators called "servos." These servos are essentially computer- or radio-controlled gear systems which control movement. Over time, the company added a retail division called ServoCity.com, for individuals who wanted to purchase these devices for their own use.

"This took off like crazy," Brian said. "Online sales quickly surpassed the education sales."

One application for these robotic controls is in pan and tilt camera systems. RobotZone has produced products for use by such clients as the BBC, National

Geographic, Animal Planet, NBC Special Effects, and others in Hollywood. They've been used for everything from movies to documentaries to tv commercials to the Tonight show. Wow.

These products have even gone overseas. Families in India, for example, are buying the robotic controlled cameras for filming their weddings.

How amazing to find this company in rural Kansas. "Many companies are surprised to find we're not located on the coasts," Brian said. RobotZone has contracted out some of its manufacturing to a machine shop in Atlanta – Atlanta, Kansas, that is, population 252 people. Now, that's rural.

RobotZone completed a 30,000 square foot building in 2010. "The city of Winfield has been fantastic," Brian said. "We have absolutely the best employees who are passionate about their work."

From the BBC to the U.S. Army, RobotZone has an impressive client list. We commend Brian Pettey and all those involved with RobotZone and Servocity for making a difference with their innovation and creativity. How exciting to find robots making the journey from Kansas around the globe.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.