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James Boynton, Galesburg, uses a locally designed and built resistance welder to begin building a screen Thursday at B.D.I.

Company on trade mission to S. America

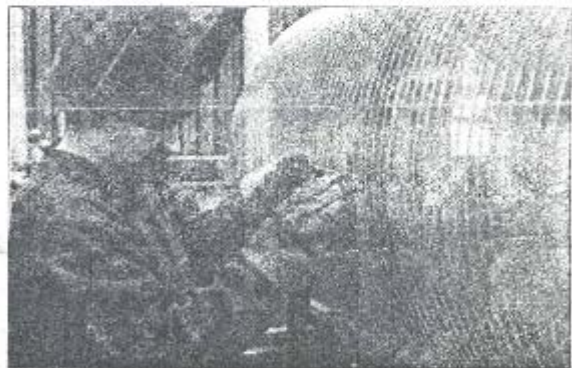
Owners find trip successful, but wonder how they were chosen

BY JOHN R. PULLIAM
The Register-Mail

GALESBURG — It almost sounds more like the plot for a novel, a thriller, than the real-life experience it was. B.D.I., a Galesburg manufacturer of stainless steel industrial screens, remains grateful, although in the dark, as to how the company was chosen as one of five from the state to take part in a trade mission to four countries in South America.

Steve Gilles and Pam Wildermuth made the trip on behalf of B.D.I. Mike Sweeney and Rick Dechow are the other two owners of the firm, which has 17 full- and four part-time employees. B.D.I. still operates out of the Galesburg Regional Economic Development Association incubator on Monmouth Boulevard, the former National Seal Building. The company became the first tenant of the incubator in April 2004.

A 5-year-old company, with



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John Lorincz, Knoxville, welds upper and lower halves of a very fine mesh stainless steel screen together Thursday at B.D.I. to create a cylinder. The finished piece is destined for a food processing plant where it will be a water outake filter.

"We don't know how we got chosen, but we're glad we were," she said.

The two of B.D.I.'s four owners and seven representatives of four other companies traveled to Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Peru during the last two weeks of March. The tour was put together by the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Illinois Trade and Investment Latin American office and the Department of Commerce and Economic Oppor-

Wildermuth were able to go on the trade mission when an opening popped up.

Wildermuth said representatives of the companies on the trip were treated like royalty. In each country, there was a meeting with that country's ambassador to the U.S. and the counsel general.

"Then they presented us with a whole list of appointments they felt would apply

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to us," Gilles said.

The entire group traveled together to each country, then each company was assigned a driver and a translator and spent their days visiting South American firms.

"We had over 30 really good appointments we couldn't have done on our own," Gilles said.

"We feel like it went really well," Wildermuth said.

How big was the trip to the young, still-growing company? Gilles said they put together monthly projections for the coming year, based on domestic sales, shortly before the trade mission.

"The trip has the potential to equal our domestic projections," Gilles said.

The trip

Among interesting things encountered on the trip was how different each country was.

"You'd think they're all similar and they're not," he said. "Not a single country resembled the others."

Gilles said Sao Paulo, Brazil, a city of 17 million people, was amazing just because of its size. Buenos Aires, Argentina, however, "It was like 1930s Europe."

"The only thing that gave it away that you weren't in the U.S. was the language," Gilles said of Chile.

Meanwhile, Peru was "almost like a Third World country, but it's growing faster than the other ones," he said.

Wildermuth said the people were all somewhat alike.

"Everybody was so friendly and helpful," she said.

Both were amazed that officials in all the companies had brochures from B.D.i. and were well versed as to the company.

The trip was two years in the planning and both Gilles and Wildermuth said it was evident. The first day in each country meant a briefing on that

here, but they have imposed tariffs, which will probably double the price. Like, Chile is a free trade country, just like Mexico. Peru is looking at it," Gilles said. "They just let us know what the business climate was in each country and what the potential was for us."

Days began at 7 a.m., appointments went until 5 p.m., with elaborate receptions until 11 p.m., Wildermuth and Gilles said.

"Here the ambassador comes up and wants to talk to us," Gilles said, still bemused by the experience. "Why in the world would the ambassador care, unless he thought we worked with Caterpillar?"

There was little time for sightseeing or shopping.

What recession?

Both agreed there was another surprising thing about South America.

"They have stockpiled their money so many years for this rainy day," Gilles said. "They have no recession there."

"We never heard about how bad things were," Wildermuth said.

"Not a word," Gilles said.

Wildermuth called it "a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

As to what it will mean to the future, "we're working on it," she said. "We're trying to get it nurtured."

"If we develop South America with what we've got domestically, we've got a lot of expansion to do," Gilles said.

B.D.i. officials also were told simply to contact the state if they have interest breaking into markets in other countries. Still somewhat puzzled by the entire chain of events, Wildermuth said officials have talked about the company's official name, B. Deo-Volente Inc., which, in Latin, means "Be God Willing."

"With our name, we've said obviously somebody is looking out for us," Wildermuth said.

Firm a finalist for incubator award

Had 'fantastic year last year'

BY JOHN R. PULLIAM
The Register-Mail

GALESBURG — Although B.D.i. officials express wonderment about their recent participation in a trade mission to South America, the company is definitely being noticed. A manufacturer of industrial screens, B.D.i. is a finalist for Outstanding Incubator Client.

The custom industrial steel screening made by B.D.i. is used in the mining and food processing industries. Screens also are produced for architectural applications.

In December 2004, B.D.i. received a \$5,000 Opportunity Returns challenge grant. That

grant was received just a month after the company began production and less than a year after it was organized. Applicants for the grants were required to provide a 100 percent cash match. The awards were based on the firm's display of project viability and growth potential, among other things.

Steve Gilles and Pam Wildermuth, two of the company's four owners, said not only was everyone in South America helpful, there was a lot of cooperation from the other U.S. entities on the trip.

"We made a lot of good connections," Wildermuth said. "There was a lot of camaraderie."

"Everybody was there for the same purpose. Let's see how we can

help each other.' That was nice," she added.

One of the connections was with two representatives from MidAmerica St. Louis Airport, near Mascoutah, adjacent to Scott Air Force Base. The airport representatives talked with B.D.i. about what it would need to do to ship its goods through MidAmerica.

Both Wildermuth and Gilles were impressed by the assistant city manager of Greenville, a small college town near St. Louis, Gilles said the woman, rather than trying to attract new businesses to Greenville, was attempting to attract South American customers for existing businesses in the southern Illinois community.

"She was the voice of her town," Gilles said.

Wildermuth said the assistant city manager went to businesses in Greenville before going on the trade mission to learn specifically what type of firms in the four South American companies might want to do business with Greenville companies.

While the countries the B.D.i. officials traveled to in South America had enough money stockpiled that there was no evidence of a recession, such, of course, is not the case in the U.S.

Wildermuth said, "We had a fantastic year last year and we worked six days a week most of the year, seven days a week some of the time."

Gilles said they have cut back to one full shift that works five days a week.