

Three Rivers gets its technology to those who need it

BY LINDA OBELE

Special to The Business Journal

Proving that high technology needn't be complicated to be appreciated, a Mesa-based technology transfer company is this year's winner of the Governor's Celebration of Innovation award for the most innovative startup business.

The premise behind Three Rivers Holdings' core business sounds simple enough: Transfer technology from the hallowed halls of academia into the eagerly awaiting

CELEBRATION OF INNOVATION

Innovator of the Year Startup:
Three Rivers Holdings

hands of people who can benefit — in this case, the nation's 2 million wheelchair users and 2,000 rehabilitation clinics.

The company works with researchers throughout the country to polish rough prototypes of medical rehabilitation products and bring them to market through exclusive licensing agreements.

Company officials estimate there are scores of these untapped, potentially life-changing, inventions collecting dust in research labs all across the country.

But, perhaps what is most impressive about the company is that none of its three partners has a technology background — nor a rehab-product background, for that matter.

President Ron Boninger and Vice President of Operations Chris Willems have a combined 35 years' worth of business and manufacturing experience, while David Boninger, vice president of research and de-



JIM POULIN/THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Turning research into practical products, such as wheelchairs, is the focus of Three Rivers Holdings and its Vice President of Research David Boninger, President Ron Boninger and Vice President of Operations Chris Willems.

velopment, spent the 10 years prior to forming the business in 1999 as a psychology professor, researcher, and grant writer.

"There was a pretty steep learning curve," admitted David Boninger, who used his grant-writing experience to secure more than \$1.8 million in grant awards to launch the company.

A third Boninger brother, Michael, also is affiliated with the company. One of the nation's top medical rehab products researchers, based at the University of Pittsburgh, he was the impetus for his brothers entering the wheelchair-user market.

"At the time, we were looking at business ideas, Michael said he and his partner, Rory Cooper, a wheelchair user, were developing products all the time that were sitting on the shelf," said David Boninger.

"The benefit of working with universities is two-fold: It keeps our pipeline full and helps us hold onto our innovative edge. We're not stuck sitting in our own office trying to come up with ideas."

While the company presently has 10 products in various stages of development or commercialization, two have made it to market since the company was formed.

One is the SmartWheel, a sophisticated diagnostic tool introduced in early 2002 that assists clinicians in fitting wheelchair users with their chairs. David Boninger likens its usefulness to the tools an optometrist employs to fit a person for eyeglasses.

The other product, which debuted this summer, is the Natural-Fit, an ergonomically designed wheelchair handrim that maximizes a comfortable fit between a wheelchair user's hand and the chair's wheel rim. Both products are licensed from the University of Pittsburgh.

Two, possibly three, more designs are on the drawing board for 2004, including the GameCycle, an upper-body exercise system for people with disabilities, and a folding wheelchair that can fit into the overhead compartment of an airplane.

David Boninger credits his company's success to carefully listening to end users via trade shows and professional organizations. The best innovations come from the people using the products and working with talented researchers and inventors, he said.

"These are brilliant people," he said.

Possibly the most gratifying part of his business, though, is the potential for his company's innovations to dramatically improve the lives of disabled individuals.

"For the most part, it's too early to tell how our product innovations have changed lives, since they've only recently been introduced to the market," David Boninger said.

"It takes a long time for things to penetrate the market. But, I hope if you call me again in two years, I can say the products are really out there, and we are starting to affect a change."

■ GET CONNECTED

Three Rivers Holdings: www.3rivers.com