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Water jet machine available at Vashon College

By Leslie Brown

Jan 02 2008

For years, John Olsen, an MIT-trained engineer with a doctorate in fluid mechanics, has wondered how Vashon artists might use the water-jet technology he first developed in his garage on the Island some 30 years ago.

Now, thanks to a chance conversation on a ferry boat, he's getting an opportunity to find out.

Olsen, whose backyard experiments ultimately led to him building a patented abrasive jet machine that has spawned a multi-million-dollar-a-year industry, has sold one of his used machines to Vashon College, giving the small school a pay-as-you-go deal it could afford.

As a result, nearly every week, a small but growing number of Islanders are beginning to experiment with a technology that years ago revolutionized the world of precision tool-making.

With Bob Powell, one of two Vashon College paid employees, at the helm, students from Terry Swift's art class at McMurray Middle School have made earrings and pendants on the machine. Terry Sutton, a tile-maker and installer on the Island, is beginning to develop a new product line, designing stone-inlaid tiles made of marble and granite.

And renowned sculptor Julie Spiedel has begun to experiment with the machine, using it to build some of the support pieces for her larger-than-life sculptures.

One Islander made an ornate, stainless steel bathtub with the machine; another carved a heron out of steel that now adorns a front gate.

Olsen, who is vice president of operations at OMAX Corp. in Kent, which manufactures water-jet cutting machines, realized Vashon College might be able to use the machine after he chatted with Vashon College trustee Bill Cox on the ferry one morning.

"There are a lot of very talented people on the Island," Olsen said.

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"It's an experiment," he added. "I want to see if this can take off."

Vashon College's abrasive water-jet cutting machine sits in a large, chilly warehouse in the J.T. Sheffield Building a mile or so south of town, where Powell — in a woolen cap and bulky sweater — operates it with a kind of boyish joy.

"I'm like a big kid playing with an erector set," he said, smiling.

To Powell, a software designer who played a role in designing some of the sophisticated systems at Bill Gates' showcase home, the machine is amazing. According to specifications keyed into an adjacent computer, it fires 50,000 pounds per square inch of ground garnet and water into steel, bronze, copper, titanium or other metals — a cold-water process powerful enough to cut through two inches of steel and accurate enough to create precision machine parts.

Sutton made a delicate-looking marble salmon that he sold as a Christmas ornament at the Heron's Nest last month. Powell used the machine to design and build a lifting-rig strong enough to place the sometimes huge pieces of steel onto the machine's tray-like bed where the cutting occurs.

"The machine is a high-tech wonder," Powell said.

But the OMAX, as Powell and others call it, is more than a big toy. Powell has been charged by Vashon College with using the machine to turn a profit, providing the organization with the cash it needs to continue to grow.

The idea, Powell said, is to offer classes and one-on-one trainings to artists, architects, designers and others who might be interested in the machine's many applications and then let them purchase time on the machine to fabricate their own pieces.

"This is a fairly unique setting where this sophisticated machine ... is being made available to individual artists for projects as small or large as they can imagine," Powell said. "It's an unusual opportunity to have access to an abrasive water jet in such an easy-to-use setting."

Because Olsen is not charging the college any financing costs and is allowing the college to pay it off over time, the college is already beginning to realize a small profit from the OMAX, Powell said.

The machine retails for \$200,000; the college bought it used for less than that, although Powell would not reveal the exact price. The college hopes to have it completely paid off by next year, Powell said.

"Just running it shows a profit," Powell said.

Sutton is one of the first Islanders to take advantage of the opportunity, Powell said. And according to the Vashon tile-maker, he's thrilled by the results.

Thanks to the machine, Sutton said, he's now taking his business, Terrapin Tile, in a new direction, developing what he

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calls "conversation pieces" for high-end homes on the Island.

His dream is to work with architects and designers "from the get-go," playing a role in certain elements of a home's design construction, he said. The OMAX, he said, just might enable him to bring his dreams to fruition.

"It is truly an amazing device," Sutton said.

