

Smoky Lake honored for exporting

By Ed Byrne
The Brillion News

HILBERT – The Wisconsin 2020 Small Business Exporter of the Year is Smoky Lake Maple Products in Hilbert.

The business began in 2008 at the home of Jim and Angela Schumacher, in Kaukauna. The married couple spent their weekends in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan - at Jim's cabin between Big Smoky Lake and Little Smoky Lake - and it was there they tapped maple trees in late winter and turned the sap into maple syrup.

What started as a weekend hobby became a home-grown business. Jim started by experimenting with ways to make the cooking of maple syrup a more efficient process.

In 2011, he left his job as a plumber and began manufacturing his own line of maple syrup equipment.

Eventually, the business outgrew the Schumacher home, and they built



Jim and Angela Schumacher, owners of Smoky Lake Maple Products, were honored for their dedication to exporting their products, which are manufactured at their plant in the Hilbert West Side Industrial Park. (Ed Byrne/BN)

their first free-standing showroom and manufacturing shop in Hilbert's new West Side Industrial Park.

Since then, the facility has expanded, and on September 10, the U.S. Small Business Administration named Smoky Lake the state's top small business exporter.

"We will definitely continue refining the export side of our business," Angela said. "We are currently in the process of upgrading our website to enhance the customer experience. In addition to that, we are expanding our shipping department. We strive to make the entire export process as smooth as silk, both internally and for our customers."

The Schumachers have grown their company into one of the country's largest manufacturers and distributors of maple syrup production equipment and supplies.

"We had actually planned for expansion from the beginning," Angela said. "All of our blueprints were designed with the intention of adding on the showroom, and then the warehouse."

The expansion isn't likely to end there.

"Our next phase will be to add on additional shop space," Angela said.

Ironically, some of the expansion may be into areas that don't involve making maple syrup.

"A vast array of other industries have been excited to find and use our products, especially our Stainless Steel Filter Press which has been used in industries such as CBD, pharmaceutical, wine, cocoa butter, honey and many other things," Angela said.



Smoky Lake Maple Products' property includes a large showroom, offices, manufacturing facility and warehouse, with expansion in the works. (Ed Byrne/BN)

But the primary focus of Smoky Lake isn't changing.

"It would be foolish of us to try to

be everything to everyone," she said. "We are experts in maple and intend to stay true to our mission of push-

ing the maple industry forward ... I'm sure we will continue to encounter other industries who want to repurpose our equipment for non-maple uses and we are delighted to help them. But we are always very up front with them and tell them that our expertise is in maple."

The regional administrator of the SBA, Rob Scott, presented the exporting award to Jim and Angela Schumacher.

One element of the company success is the counsel of SCORE - the Service Corps of Retired Executives. These retired business people help new business grow by giving them the advice of experience.

SCORE volunteers Marylou Vandehey, Bob Molitor and Michael Mazera worked with Smoky Lake on internal controls, export processes and packaging.