

‘Contributing to the community’

T.G. Missouri a major part of area’s growth

By Beth Durreman
bethd@perryvillemnews.com

BREAKING GROUND IN 1986

Perry County and Perryville have seen a lot of growth over the years, and the recipient of the 2021 Business of the year award has been a part of that growth for more than 30 years.

That growth began in 1986. In a 1986 Associated Press story “officials of the Toyoda Gosei Company have announced in Japan their decision to build an auto parts manufacturing plant in Perryville.”

The general manager of the Toyoda Gosei U.S. Project, Minoru Kobayashi, explained the company’s decision to choose Perryville as the first location was due to several factors; one being “the very nice reception we felt at the initial stage of selection of the plant site, and the warm reception of officials and people in Perryville.”

The first plant has seen continued growth since the first employees were hired in February 1987.

The grand opening was held on May 1, 1987. The company’s combined vision; to employ the most advanced technological methods available, using automation to assist in the making of automobile products; to employ citizens in the area with their strong work ethic. This 33-year journey, now under the leadership of President Dean Link, forms the cutting edge company that TG Missouri is today.

FACING AN UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS

Except for the service line, which has approximately 60 employees, TG was shut down for approximately six weeks due to the COVID-19

pandemic at the end of March. During that down time, management met weekly and created a 59-page document on the protocols to re-open the plant.

TG Missouri is the parent plant in North America, so when they created the COVID-19 protocol it was shared with all of their plants.

“Incorporating these protocols was quite an undertaking. We had to provide distance for 1,700 plus employees, install sanitizing stations, procure enough sanitizer spray canisters, and keep everyone safe,” said Fred Ducharme, Vice President of Administration. If an employee becomes sick, their workstation is immediately sanitized.

More than 2,500 bottles of spray sanitizer was purchased to get the plant back open.

Protocols were put in place for the 42 restrooms and the spacing of work stations. The lunch room went from a full service lunch room to a “fresh market” it is all self service, and purchased items are paid with an app on employees’ phones and all lunchroom tables have dividers.

During the shut down, TG took care of their employees by making sure they still had their full health insurance.

TG is deemed an essential business. “Our original thoughts were, when we opened back up in May that things would essentially be slow” said Ducharme, but that’s not what happened. “We ramped up so fast, and we have stayed ramped up ever since. The majority of our workforce returned, in May and June 2020.”

Around August management discovered that more people were needed to keep their productivity at the level it needed to be. They deter-



REPUBLIC-MONITOR/BETH DURREMAN

T.G. Missouri’s new 70,000 square foot plant expansion is now complete and the first specialty exterior paint booth began operation Jan. 1, 2021.

mined they needed 160 new employees. TG has been on a hiring campaign since and is still looking to fill around 30 more positions.

LONGEVITY EQUALS LEGACY EMPLOYEES

TG experiences very little turn over of employees. At two years, only a 1.4 percent turn over rate is experienced. At the four-year mark, it is almost nonexistent. Generally, once an employee has worked here for 5 years they stay.

TG is proud of the five inaugural employees still working, since the start of our business in 1987, with 33 years of experience. They are Denise Riehn, Sr. General Accounting Manager; Lora Roth, Sr. General Manager of Production; Kevin Elder, Maintenance Team Member; Richard Kuntze, Shipping Specialist and Linda Light, Packaging Specialist. TG has approximately 70 employees with over 30 years tenure.

The Management staff are all senior employees with 20

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The specialty exterior paint booth went operational Jan. 1, 2021. A second booth is ordered and the third one is still waiting for approval.

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Business

FROM PAGE 3B

years or more at the Perryville plant.

The success of long term and legacy employees can be attributed to many factors, dedication to the employees, benefits and competitive pay.

In January, management raised the hourly wages by 8 percent. The goal is to stay consistently above minimum wage, but TG also wants to provide a good starting wage to their new employees.

An excellent benefit program is available, including health insurance, 401K. "The insurance companies we partner with say we are way out in front of everybody, "We take care of our employees," said DuCharme.

The company is mindful of taking too many employees from another Perry County employer, so the amount of employees moving from any single local company is limited. They believe it doesn't serve the community if it hurts other local companies.

"JUST IN TIME MANUFACTURING"

TG has a highly functioning manufacturing philosophy, "Just in Time Manufacturing."

The Perryville plant has been so successful with it that the management teams oversee three other TG plants to help them successfully implement the program as well.

Customers of TG order their product and it is delivered in one to two days. What makes this so remarkable is there is typically less than six hours of inventory. Once the order comes in, the production begins. This puts a demand on the work force, and it can be difficult at times, but the team members consistently meet these requirements.

On any given day there will be 100 to 120 tractor-trailers leaving from the shipping warehouse. That is a lot of product moving in such a short time.

EXPANSION

The new 70,000 square foot building is now completed and will house three paint booths. Trials with the first paint booth began in December and became fully operational Jan. 1, 2021. The second is ordered and the third one is still waiting for approval.

The demand is now for specialty exterior paints, which has replaced the demand of adding additional floor space to the chrome department. Some productivity improvements were made that allowed the chrome department to stay in its current location.

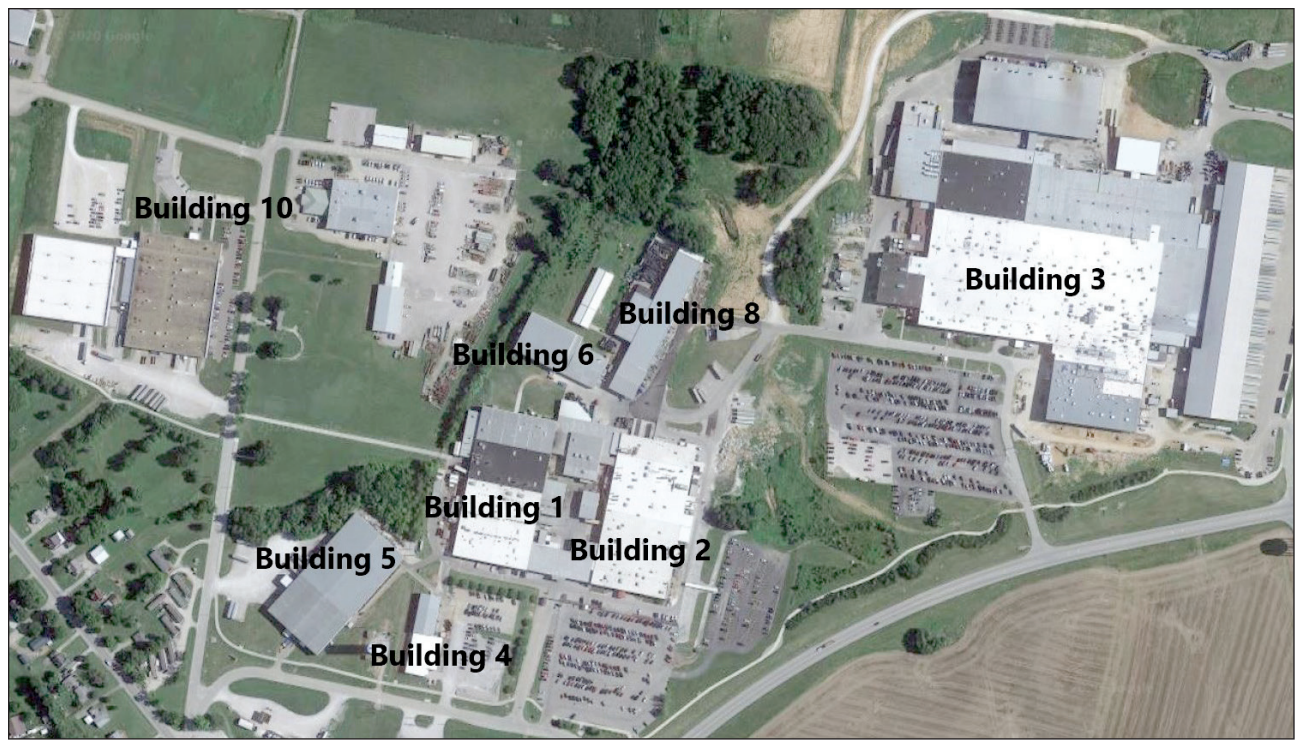
TG is seeing a trend in their business, turning from interior products to exterior products, grills, fascia, etc.

This trend toward the new specialty paint is the reason for the three new paint booths. Some of the new grilles are being done with the new paint line, which cuts down on the demand of the chrome department.

Toyota is still the largest customer, but significant growth is being seen with Honda, which is currently their second largest customer. Both of these customers will be making use of the new specialty paint.

LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS

The philosophy from the Toyoda Gosei charter is community involvement "They want their plants to be



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The campus of TG Missouri consists of 246 acres. Building three has the new paint booth expansion. All of these buildings combined have over 2 million square feet.

involved heavily with their community, both through supporting local business and through volunteerism," Ducharme said.

A lot of volunteer projects originated from the employees, which is how these programs initially got started.

There are programs in place where requests can be made from the company, and they also have programs that are initiated from the top, like the 5K

trail constructed for their 30-year anniversary.

TG works to keep their employees involved in the community, whether it be a structured entity like the Chamber of Commerce, or a fundraiser for an individual. "We have a new pilot program that is working in the background, it started about a year ago, called "succession planning," Ducharme said

TG has taken 11 employees who are on the right

path to move into managing the company, and has them on an accelerated learning program. " There are senior management personnel that are getting ready to retire and this plan will prepare these individuals to step in and take over," Said Ducharme. TG has set a goal to have this "succession program" set up for all their activities.

IMPACT OF THE AWARD

TG management sees this award as a very positive mark on their company.

"It's always a positive when our employees can see their company being acknowledged for their contribution to their own community," said Ducharme. TG Missouri Corporation has received many awards nationally and internationally, but this is the first local honor as Business of the Year.

It is an honor that they plan to share in their company newsletter on social media and in announcements to team members.

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Chamber of Commerce inducts new board members

By Justin Hotop
jhotop@perryvillemnews.com

The Perryville Area Chamber of Commerce had to do things a little differently when it came to inducting their newest members on the Board of Directors.

The Chamber had to cancel their annual dinner that was originally scheduled for this Thursday, so the newly elected board members, which would have been inducted at that meeting were inducted on Jan. 21 at the Chamber of Commerce instead.

“To have more than 300 people inside the Legion on that night did not make sense with the current situation,” Chamber Director Jackie Wengert said. “It was a tough decision for sure because there are a lot of people that look forward to that meeting.”

The board members were elected back in October 2020 and they were Alexandria Lueders, Chris Horrell, Amy Hager and Cynthia Naumann

Lueders is the closer and office manager for United Land Title in Perryville. She has served on the Board of Directors for the past three years and the last two as Chamber President. Lueders



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Perryville Area Chamber of Commerce board members were recently inducted at the Chamber office Jan. 21. From left, are Caitlin Pistorio (Board President), Jacob Ritter, Chris Horrell, Cindy Naumann, Jamie Robinson (Secretary/Treasurer), Amy Hager, Brandie Mantz (Vice President), Melissa Hoehn, Justin Pyland, Alex Lueders (Past President), and Kaitlyn Wibbenmeyer. Typically, the board is formally inducted at the annual Chamber dinner held this week in January. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the dinner did not take place.

has served on various committees including Mayfest, Xquisite Women’s Leadership Conference. She welcomes the opportunity to serve on the board for the next three years.

Hager has been an accountant at HSB Advisors, LLC for 13 years where she specializes in tax, payroll, and accounting services. She is also a certified QuickBooks ProAdvisor.

Hager enjoys being involved in non-profit organizations and has been a member of the Perryville Rotary Club since 2007, and previ-

ously served as board president. Hager helped form Impact 100 Perry County in 2016, where she served as treasurer for three years.

Horrell is the owner of our local Bug Zero office that provides pest control service to the greater Perryville and Southeast Missouri area. Horrell has been a member of the Perryville Chamber of Commerce since 2013 and served on the Chamber board in 2017. Bug Zero has been a sponsor for the Chamber’s Coffee and Connections event multiple times. Horrell was

honored to be elected.

“I’m excited to be elected to the Board of Directors,” Horrell said. “I have seen a benefit to being a part of the Chamber and enjoy being in Perryville and want to be a part of its success.”

Naumann is the owner and operator of Timberland Campground, or formerly Perryville Campground, in Perryville. Naumann and her husband moved to the area in January 2019 and was surprised that she was elected to the Board of Director, despite not being in the area as long as other candidates.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Perryville Area Chamber of Commerce outgoing board members were, from left, Dalton Buehler, Danielle Hoeckle and Alex Lueders. Not pictured is Kelly Brown.

“We haven’t been in Perryville too long, but I hope

to do a good enough job,” Naumann said. “I’m excited to get going and see how I can help.”

The outgoing members of the board are Dalton Buehler, Kelly Brown, and Danielle Hoeckle.

“They served the board well and they will be missed,” Wengert said.

However, she is looking forward to what the new members of the board will bring to the table.

“I believe that the new members will do well,” Wengert said. “I can’t wait to see the ideas that they have to help improve the community and make Perryville the best it can be.”

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Heroes for Kids: Lonnie Johnson's way of paying it forward

By Daniel Winningham
editor@perryvillemews.com

This year's recipient of the *Republic-Monitor* Citizen of the Year award, Lonnie Johnson, is a fixture at two places – comic conventions and in Perry County courtrooms. Volunteering and donating to charitable causes has come naturally to him.

"Being a recipient of children's hospitals myself, then also my kids, I've always wanted to give back. I wouldn't be where I am without the help I've had."

A few years ago, he began Heroes for Kids though his days as a true superhero began much earlier than his time in Superman's famous blue tights and red cape.

"The concept for it started in 2014 because of my kids," Johnson said. "We were in Metropolis (Illinois) at the Superman Celebration and my kids thought it would be neat for dad to dress up as Superman for the next year's Celebration. My wife and I looked into renting a costume, but after seeing the prices, decided it would be cheaper to just go ahead and purchase one. After purchasing my suit, it was like 'We already do stuff for charity, why don't we put it to use for charity events?' That was how 'Heroes for Kids' started."

Asked if he had a favorite comic book or television character as a child, Johnson said he gravitated toward Clark Kent's alter ego.

"Superman has always been one of my favorite comic book characters. I've collected comic books all my life, but really getting into it, doing the dress up, it didn't really start until my kids thought it would be cool to do."

Straying slightly from the comic book hero theme, Johnson said he has simply considered his father as a superhero.

"My dad was my real life superhero," Johnson said. "My dad was a cop and being a cop in the St. Louis area we really didn't get to see him much because it's St. Louis. My outlook on cops growing up was that they are the real super heroes, and my dad liked Superman, so it was one of those things that just carried over to me."

Heroes for Kids Whether it's taking part in community events, such as Mayfest, local homecoming parades, to visiting patients at hospitals, Johnson seems to have the right attitude about it.

"A lot of hospitals have restrictions on who can come in...when we do get to go in, a lot of times it's for a specific family and then there are times when the hospital puts on a fun day for kids, we get to go in and help with that as well."

He'll visit any hospital that admits children but isn't necessarily limited to that detail.

"We have actually done visits for adults as well," said Lonnie's wife, Jessica Johnson.

"Just about every adult is a kid at heart with something," said Lonnie.

He never thought that Heroes for Kids would get this big. However, he is pleased to bring smiles to children's faces.

"What better way to be able to bring pop culture to everybody and also bring a smile to kids' faces while doing it."

Starting out as a rather small venture, Heroes for Kids has grown into a much larger organization that focuses on doing what it can to encourage local residents to help charities for children and real life heroes. Now, not just a southeast Missouri fixture, the organization has done events in Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee.

"We do a lot of shout outs and have a lot of friends in those areas that help us," Johnson said. "(Sometimes it's) 'Hey, is there a charity organization in the area that would like some help? This



Lonnie Johnson, center, appears as Superman with a group of his friends at a child's benefit. Johnson, who has been employed with the Perry County Sheriff's Office since 2001, started the Heroes for Kids organization several years ago. Johnson was named the 2021 Citizen of the Year. Others in this photo, from Dec. 13, 2020, are, from left, Jennifer Merideth (Dr. Strange), Jody Merideth (Captain America), Chelsea Lane (Harley Quinn) and Jessica Johnson (Catwoman).

SUBMITTED PHOTO

is what we do.' We try to team up with first responders and law enforcement as a way to help with community relations. Same way with hospitals, if there are other organizations, we'll partner with them to go see children in the hospitals or do a meet and greet at someone's home. If we go to actual events, we're able to set up our merchandise and that's how we raise money for charities that we help."

Much like every charitable organization, the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a challenging aspect for Johnson and his group.

"(The pandemic in) 2020 did hit us pretty hard," Johnson said. "We're used to (traveling) almost every weekend...in 2019 it was almost every weekend doing something, whether it was a comic con raising money for a specific charity, or going to a specific charity event, or organizing a charity event. Last year, with Covid-19, it cut everything down."

Jessica said it was perhaps a total of five to eight activities in 2020.

The signature event for Perryville was supposed to be a comic convention at the Park Center. The inaugural outing took place in 2019, with money from the event going to the Hope Center and Children's Miracle Network (Cardinal Glennon and St. Louis Children's Hospitals).

The 2019 version included actors Wyatt Weed, W.F. Bell and Matthew Atchley.

Heroes for Kids Comic Con is set for Saturday, July

17, 2021 and plans are to have John Anderson from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as well as Philo Barnhart, a second generation Disney animator, actor and artist Matthew Atchley with proceeds from the event going to the Missouri National Veterans Memorial and St. Jude's Hospital.

In addition to his wife, Jessica, his family includes son Adrian, 21, and daughter Tessa, 15.

Superman can often be found with Batman (Dennis Manning from Perryville) when in costume. Johnson, his wife Jessica and Manning are the directors of Heroes for Kids.

Johnson described his first meeting with Manning, which was at the Cape Girardeau Comic Con a few years back.

"He was dressed as Captain America," Lonnie said. "He thought my costume was cool, we pretty much hit it off from there. Many of the co-players went out for dinner later that evening and that was when we found out we both lived in Perryville."

Heroes for Kids serves as Johnson's way of paying it forward.

"We've been that family sitting in the waiting room wondering if we're going to make it out of this. Being able to walk into a hospital room and, hopefully, knock on wood, it's not the last time a parent sees their child, but to be able to give their child maybe one last smile."

Johnson said he has had appearances in which the patient eventually succumbs to

cancer or another untreatable ailment.

"We have done a few meet and greets with families where unfortunately the unthinkable happens," he said.

Law enforcement career

When not dressing up and playing the role of Superman, Johnson is on a mission to protect and serve.

"I originally wanted to go into the military but due to health reasons, I wasn't allowed to enlist," Johnson said. "It was a (career) path I was told I couldn't take."

The events of 9/11 prompted him to get involved in law enforcement.

"If I couldn't do something for my country, I wanted to do something to help the community," Johnson said. "This September will be 20 years."

Johnson began working at the Perry County Sheriff's Office in 2001.

"I started out in the jail," he said. "I was a jailer for several years, then the assistant jail administrator for several years. I was the acting captain when the current captain was deployed overseas."

When the former bailiff left, Johnson began serving at the courthouse. He also assists with transports and calls as needed.

Johnson readily admits the perception of law enforcement has changed over the years. However, Johnson remains grateful for the opportunities he has had through the years.

"The way the world perceives law enforcement and

SEE CITIZEN/PAGE 7B



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Lonnie Johnson, aka Superman, holds the American flag outside the Perry Park Center during the 2019 comic con event. Heroes for Kids is planning to host the event again at the Park Center later this summer.

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Citizen

FROM PAGE 6B

first responders in general is totally different than what it was 10 years ago," Johnson said. "Thank God we have a community like we do that backs our law enforcement and is very pro-law enforcement. I couldn't ask for a better community to live in."

Johnson grew up in St. Louis before moving to Fredericktown, graduating in 1997. His wife's family has ties to Perry County. Her grandparents lived here for nearly 30 years. The couple ended up moving to Perryville to be closer to family.

In addition, other appearances as Superman have led to opportunities to introduce kids to real life superheroes, according to Johnson.

"What better way to breach that gap than to get the superheroes out there and while we are getting the high



Lonnie Johnson strikes a pose in character as Superman with a few children while his friend and fellow Heroes for Kids director Dennis Manning (Batman) joins him at a Perryville event.

fives, take the kids over to meet the real heroes," Johnson said. "Come meet the law enforcement officer, the firefighter, the veteran or active military personnel, or the ambulance driver. Even though I am wearing the cape...these are the real heroes."

Johnson often attempts to downplay his role as Superman, instead focusing on everyday heroes.

"The word hero is not just someone wearing a cape...it's anybody that you look (up) to...doctors, school teachers, first responders, law enforcement, firefighters, military, those are the heroes we want the kids to realize are the real heroes."

His first appearance as Superman was at the 2015 Cape Comic Con. John Wesley Shipp, the original Flash

from the short-lived television show from 1990-91, was the special guest.

"I walked in the door and struck the Superman pose, stand tall, hands on the hips. I took about half of the kids and some of the adults from his line," Johnson said.

"The thing that really got me with doing Superman was once I started walking around the aisles, checking things



Lonnie Johnson, right, presents a check to Lucas Fritsche at Robert Migel Memorial Park on French Lane in support of the Lucas & Friends Backyard Adventure, an all-inclusive playground which will be completed later this year.

out was an older lady that was working one of the booths and you could tell that she had been crying. She wasn't sad. I went over and asked her if everything was alright. All she told me was, "Thank you...you brought back my childhood...you made me believe in Superman again."

For Johnson, bringing a smile to someone's face, no matter what their age, is always a good thing.

"I have three things I am passionate about...law enforcement, my family and Heroes for Kids," Johnson said.

Johnson said he was shocked by the announcement of being named Citizen of the Year.

"It's definitely a surprise...was not expecting it. You never expect something like that. I'm honored. Heroes for Kids wouldn't have happened without the trials and tribulations that I've had in my life, the support of my wife and kids, my friends, and the community. Good Lord willing, we can keep going and make this even bigger. (I'm) thankful for the opportunity to get to do this."

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Congratulations

2021 BUSINESS OF THE YEAR TG MISSOURI

2021 CITIZEN OF THE YEAR LONNIE JOHNSON

We are proud of the contributions you make to our community.

Sheriff Gary SchAAF
PERRY COUNTY SHERIFF DEPT.

CONGRATULATIONS CITIZEN OF THE YEAR

LONNIE JOHNSON

A well-deserved award. Thank you for your commitment to the Perryville community.

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Is proud to congratulate **TG Missouri** as the 2021 Business of the Year and **Lonnie Johnson** as the 2021 Citizen of the Year!