

# BusinessWest

## Driving Force

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*The Next Generation at Advance Welding Puts the Pedal to the Metal*



Christopher Kielb says his Lamborghini is an attention getter that helps him educate young people about opportunities in the manufacturing sector.

Christopher Kielb calls it one of his “attention diverters.”

Actually, his gray 2008 Lamborghini Murciélago is more of an attention getter, or attention holder. He uses it to help get his points across to young technical-school students attending open houses at his family’s business, Advance Welding in West Springfield.

The ultra-sleek sports car with the scissor doors is one of several vehicles kept in the storage area in the shop, including a rebuilt 1973 Mustang Mach 1 (outfitted for drag racing) that has been profiled in Hot Rod magazine, a 1932 Ford built by his father, and a 1970 Jaguar E-type race car. He uses all of them to show students how simple pieces of sheet metal can be fashioned into some of the engine and body parts they’re looking at.

“We set the shop up like a little monster garage — we’re car enthusiasts ourselves, and our family has always been into cars as well,” he explained. “I set it up with three or four cars that we’ve built, and I can actually show a young person that an intake manifold, or whatever part of

the car it is, started out as a flat piece of sheet metal, and we engineered it, and we conceptualized what the end product was supposed to look like and do.

And once he has their attention, he goes on to talk about how manufacturing in this country isn't dead, as some might believe, but is instead very much alive, and presents an attractive career option for those with the requisite skills and desire. Some of those who have sat in the Mustang over the years certainly got the point — a few of them are now working for Advance.

As for Kielb's attention — well, there are many things vying for it at the moment, and he's managed to stay focused on all of them.

For starters, there's the pursuit of new business opportunities for this 34-year-old company that specializes in many forms of highly certified welding, heat treating, brazing, and metal fabrication — one of many hats Kielb wears. Indeed, as he talked with BusinessWest, he repeatedly referenced a large job the company was hoping to win, the fabrication of clean-room scaffolding for a Dutch company. If it gains the contract — and Kielb was expecting word any day — Advance will likely bring on several new workers immediately.

There is also new equipment on the shop floor, including a \$250,000, state-of-the-art welding robot, delivered in January, and the need to secure work to pay for it.

And then there's an ongoing search for new quarters in which to expand the business; Kielb is currently looking at sites in Springfield, including a few locations on or near Route 291, and is talking with city officials and area lenders about how, when, and where to make something happen.

"I'd like to grow into the future," he explained. "Things are looking positive, with more than 30% growth over the past 12 months, but we have to be careful and manage our growth properly."

On top of all this are ownership-transition issues. Kielb and his sister, Melinda Mitton, have taken over most operating responsibilities from their parents, Kasmer and Caroline Kielb, and are in the process of attaining majority ownership status, although no timetable has been set for such a step.

For this issue, BusinessWest takes an in-depth look at one of the many bright spots within the region's manufacturing sector, a small company with enormous potential for growth, further diversification, and additional employment.

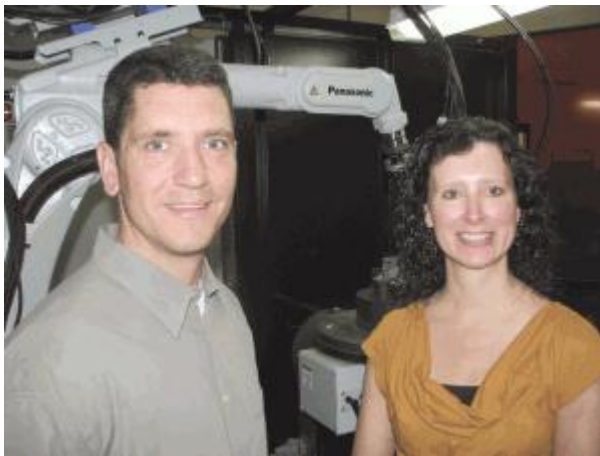
### Showing their Metal

Kielb bought the Lamborghini from a Beverly Hills resident a few years ago. It had only 3,200 miles on it when he took delivery, and he's added only about another 1,000 since.

“The car has all-wheel drive, but you really can’t be out in the snow,” he explained, adding that this is only one of many factors, including a crowded schedule, that are keeping him from putting more miles on the odometer. “It’s not a very practical vehicle, let’s put it that way.”

But this automobile can be a star while in park, and it has filled that role effectively as Kielb has featured it while hosting several of those end-of-the-school-year open houses he mentioned. In fact, he had two on consecutive days recently involving students from Springfield Day School and Chicopee Comprehensive High School.

“It’s a week of chaos,” he said, referring to the time-consuming work needed to have the shop and the cars ready for the visitors.



Siblings Christopher Kielb and Melinda Mitton have positioned Advance Welding for continued growth and diversity.

Actually, he, Mitton, and the rest of the staff have had perhaps a full year of controlled chaos at the company, with developments ranging from acquisition of new equipment and the subsequent training involved to installation of new operational software; from exploration of relocation and expansion options to the pursuit of new business like the clean room scaffolding work.

“That would be a real exciting job to get,” said Kielb with a large dose of understatement in his voice. “That would be huge for us.”

Vying for such work is all part of the continual evolution of the company started by Kasmer Kielb in an 800-square-foot space in West Springfield. In the beginning, the venture was a job shop, and in many ways it still is, but the client list and roster of services have grown exponentially.

Over the years, Advance Welding has expanded several times, most recently with an addition that doubled the size of the current facility on Allston Avenue, while also increasing its workforce from two to the current eight, with more additions likely. As equal partners in the venture, Kielb and Mitton, who essentially grew up in the shop handling a variety of jobs, both oversee the staff and wear several hats while doing so.

Mitton handles office management and accounting, certification paperwork and audits, and contract review, among other duties. Kielb, meanwhile, oversees quoting work on potential jobs, hiring, customer relations, sales (although he recently got some help there), and new-business development. He has a business degree, but admits that life in the field is nothing like the classroom.

Together, the two have diversified the company's portfolio to include a number of business sectors, including military/defense, aerospace, power generation, automotive, nuclear, and others. The current client list includes General Dynamics, Hamilton Sundstrand, Lockheed Martin, Pratt & Whitney Canada, United Technologies, and Westinghouse Electric.

Specific parts the company works on have varied, from the barrel of a semiautomatic grenade launcher produced by a division of General Dynamics to a new order for 50 was due in recently to the trigger handle for a machine gun mounted on a Humvee, to parts for nuclear submarines.

### All's Well That Ends Well

Such growth has been facilitated in recent years by the addition of several important certifications, said Kielb, adding that earning such designations has been one his primary strategic initiatives.

"Because a lot of the work we do is for the military, aerospace, and defense, and the contracts we want to get are for the big prime contractors — Hamilton, General Dynamics, and the whole UTC family — we needed to make sure that our quality standards were up to their expectations and requirements."

The most important additions to the list of certifications have been ISO9001, a similar designation for the aerospace industry called AS9100, and something known as NADCAP, part of the Performance Review Institute and formerly dubbed the National Aerospace and Defense Contractors Accreditation Program, an international standard more technical in nature than ISO, Kielb explained.

In addition, and again through the use of workforce training grants, the company also earned important designation as a Federal Aviation Administration repair station, something he heard his father first state as a goal more than 25 years ago, and which only recently became reality. "My dad always wanted to do it, but it's very paperwork-intensive, and he just didn't have the people to do it."

With that certification, which took more than two years to earn, the company can now more easily attain work handling repairs to commercial aircraft parts, such as the rebuilding of surfaces on bearing housings.

"I wanted to make sure we had all the standards that were required, so the primes wouldn't have any reasons not to come to us," said Kielb. "As long as our pricing is good and our delivery is good, everything just falls into place."

He told BusinessWest that the recent strategic initiatives and new certifications have led to strong growth in recent years and the potential for much more in the future. In fact, 2011 was the company's best year to date, with sales up 32%.

"It's easy to see how we achieved that growth," he explained. "Our marketing budget remained roughly the same, but we were seeing the net benefit of having these certifications and aligning ourselves with the customers that have most profitable work we can do under our roof."

These numbers have generated enough optimism for Kielb to explore expansion to 20,000 square feet, necessitating a move to larger quarters or new construction, with both options under consideration.

"I like the 291-corridor that seems like a very good central location, and I'm looking at two properties there right now," he said, adding that he's in discussions with commercial lenders, as well as with city officials and the Mass Office of Business Development, to chart the best course for the company. "The question is whether to buy, especially with all the properties on the market, or build exactly what I want."

"All I know is my personal goal is not to retire where we are right now," he joked. "I'd like to have an office with a window, air conditioning, and heat, which I don't have now."

#### The Finish Line

Kielb has posted his Lamborghini on eBay a few times in recent months, but hasn't seen an offer he'd even think about accepting in quite some time.

He likes the car and considers it one of those proverbial bucket-list items that something he had to have. But it's a rather expensive toy, and at this juncture in his life, he's eyeing something more practical.

He'll still have plenty of cars with which to grab and hold the attention of future open-house attendees, and, much more importantly, he has many other matters to which he needs to devote his attention.

As he said, this is an exciting time for this company started, literally, as a mom-and-pop operation in 1978. It has come a long way in that time, said Kielb, but there is more growth coming just down the road.