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Different Drummer

Jim Phillips owner of Copernicus Educational Products of Arthur sees business his own way.

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DRUMMER

By Campbell Cork

Driving across Highway 9 east of Arthur you can easily miss the sign for Copernicus Educational Products.

The 43-person company whose product goes around the world has two highway entrance markers that have something of a home made look to them. The wind sculptures weighted by field stones gently sway in the breeze but are almost lost in the highway hustle. The company's formal sign is further back nestled in the trees.

Right away, you know this place is different.

There is the sign at the main office. It was hand-painted on a piece of an old windmill by the son of company owner, Jim Phillips.

When you enter the front door, the walls are plastered with old and new company photos and inspirational sayings from the likes of John Lennon and Eleanor Roosevelt. The company's promotional material is similarly sprinkled with famous sayings.

This business success story has Jim Phillips written

all over it.

He is not your average button-down shirt-and-tie type of company president. Call him a sweat-shirt-and-work-boots type of company president. He is uncomfortable with the title of president, calling himself "just one of the links in the chain".

He describes himself as "chief cook and bottle washer" in the company's 2015 catalogue. Its front cover features art by a company employee.

Staff seem to be having fun. While I'm waiting for Jim to arrive for the interview, three employees in the front office offer that it's the best place to work. They love it there.

Two years running, 2013 and 2014, Copernicus was awarded Canada's Outstanding Employer Award by The Learning Partnership.

It's only after I start to catch on to Jim's quirky sense of humour that things settle down.

Straight-faced he tells me his father's ashes are still being kept in the factory. His dad, George Phillips, a retired teacher, founded the company in 1989.

Straight-faced I say, "Hey, that's different."

Big grin, he says, "Just kidding."

Fact of the matter, I learn later, George's ashes are



Staff picture at the home office.

spread under a favourite apple tree near the Copernicus plant. George's home where the factory first got started in the basement, still stands nearby.

Jim Phillips is committed to running his business in a way that is not patterned on businesses that have gone before him.

"Why should we be a business like every other business?" he asks with passion. The problem with a lot of businesses today is that they have fallen into the trap of being too focused on making money... and more money, he says.

"It ends up not being a meaningful goal," he says.

It's not hard for him to drift off into a philosophical discussion.

"We all need a certain amount of money, but there comes a point at which time you have to ask, Why? We lose track of what's important in life."

"The more focused I got on money the more messed up I got," he says.

The company has provided 75,000 tree seedlings to Ontario students to plant. The company sponsors children in third world countries

But in the early days the going was not easy. The first ten years was a grueling seven days a week. He

worked side-by-side with his dad. George was Jim's mentor in life and business and it was a blow to lose him so suddenly.

"We got very close when we were working together," he says. "I think about him all the time."

In 2001, George was at a wedding and had a severe stroke and died.

The company was more of a hobby for George. He was always thinking up new things, but not so much interested in the nuts and bolts of making it happen.

"Dad was creative. I was disciplined. Dad was never concerned about making money," Jim says.

The crunch came in 1997. It had come to the point that the part-time students were earning more than Jim. He sat down with his dad and said, we've got to make a bit of money or we're going to

have to shut the doors. They gave it one more year.

"It was at that point that things started to take off. We turned the corner," Jim says.

The company has a lime green 1977 Volkswagen camper van it took all the way to Atlanta, Georgia, last year for a conference. Educators were encouraged to write on it their thoughts about the future of education.

The company's products go around the world but its three main markets are Canada, United States and Australia.

Copernicus started in 1989 when George Phillips



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Highway entrance markers to Copernicus Educational Products

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Hits the bulls-eye

Everybody gets it!

took early retirement from teaching in Toronto at 55 years of age and started working in his basement. He had had ideas for school products brewing in his head for years. Finally it would become reality. Meanwhile his son, Jim, 21, was heading off to college to study business administration. He worked part time with his father. He graduated in 1992 and father and son worked together, first in the basement, later in the family garage. In 1993 they bought a building from a military base for a song, dismantled it, brought it back to Arthur and rebuilt it.

Jim recalls in the early days he and his dad performing quality control on the castors of a cart they planned to build.

They tied the cart behind their 1958 Chev van, Jim got in, and they towed it down a country road until the castors gave out.

There have been several expansions over the years. For the first five years it was just George and Jim and some part-timers. Today the company has 43 employees plus 11 in China. All of the company product is destined for schools. It is sold through dealers in the United States and Canada.

When the company comes up with a new idea for a product, it can be manufactured on the spot with the help of two 3-D printers.

Most of the product is manufactured in China except for prototypes and low volume jobs.

One of George's first products was a science kit, and



George Phillips taking a break from welding.

since the Polish scientist Copernicus was one of his heroes, the company was named in his honour.

Jim can't say enough about the importance of good staff.

"A key thing is the team," he says. "It took us a long time to get to the point of having a really great team. Without that you're not much of a company."

He has a vision of Copernicus becoming the most socially responsible company in the educational industry.

"That's what keeps me

motivated," he says.

The world has no choice in the matter, he says. The way things are going now, business is a burden on the environment. "We are a wart on the planet."

Solar panels will start going up on the buildings this summer. They will continue to be installed for the next five years, and his dream is to have Copernicus off the grid.

The company is following a conservation path that includes the planting of trees on the company farm.

He is passionate about the thrill of being involved in the creation of a company and getting it off the ground.

And he is definite about the fact that he won't just hand the place over to his two sons now 15 and 17.

He wants to start something new from scratch with them.

"I want them to know the creation process. How to work hard and stretch a penny as far as it will go. I want them to understand and appreciate starting something from nothing," he says.

For more of an idea of the company product go to copernicused.com

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