



CHRIS PIETSCH/The Register-Guard

John Brown (left) presents Mike Stickel of Ridgeline Pipe Manufacturing with an award during the annual Business Workforce Awards ceremony sponsored by Lane Workforce Partnership and Lane Metro Partnership.

NOT A PIPE DREAM

Ridgeline Pipe is one of three local business honorees

By **TIM CHRISTIE**
The Register-Guard

When its corporate owners shuttered the PW Pipe plastic pipe factory in Glenwood in July 2007, the move marked the demise of a long-standing local manufacturing company that paid family-wage jobs.

But less than a year later, a group of key former employees and local investors got together and decided to form Eugene Pipe, doing business as Ridgeline Pipe Manufactur-

ing. The new company started making PVC pipe in August 2008 in the same Glenwood plant and today employs 45 people — most of whom had worked for the former PW Pipe.

That phoenix-like story earned Ridgeline Pipe one of three Business Workforce Awards handed out Thursday at a luncheon sponsored by Lane Workforce Partnership and Lane Metro Partnership, local groups that promote employment and economic development.

The other recipients were Bi-Mart, a regional chain of discount stores

based in Eugene, and PacificSource Health Plans, a Springfield health insurer.

PW Pipe's roots in Glenwood go back about 25 years, when it was owned by Simpson Timber Co. The pipe company changed names and ownership several times over the years. In 2000, a year after the company was acquired by a Minnesota company, its name changed to PW Eagle, and it became the second-largest PVC company in the country, with

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Ridgeline: Bi-Mart, PacificSource also honored

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1,200 employees nationwide and revenue of nearly \$700 million a year.

In 2006, two hedge funds bought up enough PW Eagle stock to take control of the company. In June 2007, PW Eagle was sold to a competitor, J-M Manufacturing in New Jersey, and its name was changed to JM Eagle. A month later, the new owners shut the Glenwood plant, putting 56 employees out of work.

Then in March 2008, five former employees formed Ridgeline Pipe Manufacturing. Backed by local investors, plus a \$100,000 grant from Lane County and \$50,000 from the state of Oregon, the group invested an unspecified amount to renovate the factory and buy new equipment. Production resumed in August 2008.

Most of Ridgeline's 45 employees had worked for

the old company. They knew the work and they knew each other, and having an experienced, skilled work force has proved critical in the company's early success, said Mike Stickel, Ridgeline's general manager and one of its five owners.

"It gave us a three- to five-year advantage," he said. "We're not really a startup. We had quite a foundation to build on."

The company also has benefitted from the relationships that employees developed over the years with each other and with vendors and customers, he said. PVC pipe is a commodity business, so relationships make a difference, Stickel said.

Bi-Mart was recognized for being a good employer and a good corporate citizen, said Chuck Forster, executive director of the Lane Workforce Partnership. The company employs 1,000 people in Lane County, and 95 percent

are full time and eligible for benefits.

The company promotes from within, and supports local charitable organizations, he said, setting the standard for other companies.

President John Harris said Bi-Mart has not laid off a single employee over the past year, nor has it cut pay or hours for full-time employees. The company is about to open its 72nd store, in Emmett, Idaho.

Health insurer PacificSource has 440 employees at its Springfield headquarters and offices in Bend, Boise, Medford and Portland. The company contracts with 5,500 employers in the Northwest, providing health insurance to 182,000 members, said award presenter Rosie Pryor. The company makes employee wellness a priority, and believes employees should lead balanced lives, with time for family and outside interests, she said.