

Powered by Passion: Toyota West Virginia Celebrates 20 Years

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BUFFALO, W.Va. (September 21, 2016) – When Tim Bennett completed his 8-year service in the U.S. Army, there was only one place he wanted to raise his family: back home in West Virginia.

At the time, Bennett was training in Louisiana, a thousand miles from the Mountain State where he grew up. The distance, however, couldn't keep news of a new opportunity near his hometown from making its way to the bayou. It was 1997 and Toyota was hiring for its newest American manufacturing plant, a \$400 million facility with capacity to produce 300,000 four-cylinder engines annually.

So, Bennett made the trip to West Virginia to apply for the job, but when he got there, he found himself in line with a few hundred other job seekers; in fact, 19,000 people applied for the 300 initial jobs.

Bennett made the cut and began working on the first engine line in 1998. "Toyota gave me the opportunity to move back to the place where I wanted to live and raise my family," Bennett said. "I've been able to provide my kids the life I always dreamed of them having."

Now 18 years into his career as a Quality Control team member, Bennett is one of about 1,600 Toyota West Virginia team members celebrating the plant's two decades in Buffalo.

Marking a milestone

During a ceremony at the plant today, team members, community members and dignitaries joined Dr. Shoichiro Toyoda, former U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, and Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin to mark the 20th anniversary milestone with the announcement of a \$400 million investment in the facility, as well as vehicle donations to two local non-profit organizations.

"Toyota has confidence in the high quality work of our West Virginia team members," said Toyoda, honorary chairman, Toyota Motor Corp. (TMC). Dr. Toyoda, who led the decision to build the plant in West Virginia, added: "Twenty years ago we fell in love with not only the beautiful countryside of West Virginia, but the people. We are very proud of the incredible accomplishments this plant and the team members have made. The future is bright."

Since inception, TMMWV has had eight expansions to its engine and transmission lines. The \$400 million investment over the next four years will further modernize its operations to provide products of the future to customers. Among the projects is a conversion of the current generation six-speed transmission lines to next generation eight-speed transmission lines.

Change has been a constant at the plant since the groundbreaking in 1996, which Gov. Tomblin said is welcomed. "The success of Toyota's Buffalo plant showcases how skilled and dedicated West Virginia's workforce is," he said. "The men and women who manufacture the parts and make the plant run have welcomed and risen to every new challenge, making multiple innovations and expansions possible over the past two decades. Toyota and West Virginia represent a valued partnership – the kind that results in the top-notch jobs, economic advancements and lasting community enrichment that will move the Mountain State forward."

High quality, high speed

The only Toyota plant in North America that makes both engines and transmissions, TMMWV produces more than 650,000 engines and 740,000 transmissions annually. The \$1.4 billion facility currently makes four- and six-cylinder engines for the Toyota Corolla, Sienna, Highlander and Lexus RX 350, as well as transmissions for the Toyota Camry, Avalon, Sienna, Highlander and RAV4 and Lexus RX 350 models built in North America. And, they work fast. A new transmission rolls off the assembly line about every 25 seconds, with four-cylinder engines rolling off every 30 seconds. Those speeds represent the fastest production times for Toyota, globally.

“Our team members’ make the difference in our plant staying competitive,” said Millie Marshall, TMMWV president. “Every day they take pride in building a high quality product, safely.”

And, TMMWV’s impact is on more than just its team members. A recent study by the Center for Automotive Research indicates that for every one Toyota job in West Virginia, there are nearly two other jobs created across the state.

Walking the walk

For many workers, the stability and quality of their jobs is just the tip of the iceberg. They saw the reality of Toyota’s promise to them back in 2008 and 2009 when no team member was laid off despite the plant being shut down for three months during the Great Recession. During that time, team members trained, did community service or volunteered for other organizations and still received their paychecks from Toyota.

“They really showed me what job security meant. People can plan. They can plan to send their kids to school. They don’t have to worry about losing their jobs,” said Larry “Odie” O’Dell, a facilities group leader. “When I got the job, I felt like I hit the lottery. Now, almost 20 years later, I can say I did hit the lottery. This is my home now.”

That’s the spirit and sense of pride you’ll find with many team members, Marshall said, noting they are especially proud of the philanthropic impact TMMWV has made on the state. The plant has invested more than \$8 million dollars in various philanthropic and educational initiatives the past two decades. Team members have also contributed tens of thousands of volunteer hours including continued relief efforts for those devastated by deadly floods three months ago. Toyota team members are still traveling – during their work day — to the hardest hit areas to help community members rebuild.

In recognition of team members’ continued hard work, anniversary lunches will be held this week and a family picnic is planned for Saturday.

Giving back

To thank the community for its two decades of support, TMMWV donated vehicles to two area non-profit organizations: Hope Community Development Corporation, which empowers low-income individuals and families through education, employment and training, economic development, housing and support services coordination; and, Golden Girl Group Home, which helps girls in harmful or dangerous situations by giving them housing and providing a structured, caring environment. Each organization will use the vehicles to further their missions.