Natural Born Millwright Turns Passion and a Partnership with the SSMRC into Thriving Business

It took three days for Roy Blackwell to finally read the brochure on laser alignment equipment that a friend gave him. Once he did, he immediately called the supplier and ordered the equipment—and Roy Blackwell Enterprises was born.

That was back in 1997 and it was a bold decision that Roy says changed his life. Now nearly 20 years later, the company (RBE) has grown from Roy as the only employee to 30 skilled union millwrights. And from one piece of laser equipment, the Optalign Plus, to six lasers, including the FARO Laser tracker.

All precision equipment, whether rotary or machine tool, must be aligned in order to deliver accurate and quality results. When equipment is not aligned it affects production. When production relies on multi-million dollar machinery and equipment to run properly, efficiently and profitably—it’s critical that installation, maintenance and repair are done fast, safely and correctly the first time.

Valero Refinery Vice President and General Manger Mark Skobel said that “Roy’s work is vital to the 24/7 operation because the equipment is the backbone of the process.”

That process is responsible for production of approximately 195,000 barrels per day of light, low-sulfur crude oil at the Memphis refinery.

Valero employs up to 160 contractors on site, with up to 30 regular contractors.

“Roy Blackwell Enterprises is one of our top nested contractors. They focus on safety. They are responsive to our needs and always do quality work. You see Roy’s professionalism through his employees,” said Skobel.

A key decision that placed Roy Blackwell Enterprises on the map is choice of manpower. By partnering with the Southern States Millwright Regional Council, RBE is staffed with professionals from Local 1554, who are completing projects safely and on schedule with fast, accurate installations, maintenance and repair.

“I know when I call the Union Hall, I’ll get someone with the skills and knowledge to do my work,” Blackwell said.

“Performing work safely is in the DNA of SSMRC millwrights. And a safe work site starts with comprehensive training and ongoing education,” Roy Blackwell Enterprises knows the key to repeat customers and referrals is the service they provide, and that the longevity of the company depends on their customer’s satisfaction. That’s why they strive to be the industry standard for service through their professionalism, integrity, timeliness and attention to detail.

As one of the regular contractors at the Valero Refinery in Memphis, RBE has had an average crew of 8-10 millwrights onsite since 1998, performing maintenance on compressors, pumps and rotating equipment.

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– Roy Blackwell
training for every millwright on every project,” said David Park, Council Vice President and Business Representative for Local 1554.

“Our job is to support contractors like Roy Blackwell Enterprises with millwrights that have the training and experience to meet every challenge they face on the job site.”

**Solving customer problems with a focus on service**

When Roy Blackwell Enterprises gets the call, that usually means a company is down—planned or not—so it’s critical to get the system up and running as fast as possible because no production means lost revenue.

“Our responsibility is to do the job right the first time, on time, and to do it safely,” said Larry Avist, Vice president at Roy Blackwell Enterprises. “Our customers know those goals are our priority, and now they know that our manpower will deliver on that promise.”

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That’s what happened recently at an outage for Glasteel, a subsidiary of Stabilit, manufacturer of reinforced fiberglass plastic panels and polycarbonate and PVC products. Glasteel had a motor issue with the blower for their Radial Thermal Oxidizer. “Our plant relies on this machine, and it was critical for the work to get done while we were down,” said William Matthews, Maintenance Manager for Glasteel.

The enormous scrubber destroys Hazardous Air Pollutants, Volatile Organic Compounds and odorous emissions that are discharged during the manufacturing process. Roy’s team worked on the motor, rebuilt the pillow block bearings and aligned the motor and blades for the blower.

“The whole process worked like a Swiss watch—I could not have asked for any better. Roy even gave me some tips to identify signs of bearing failure on our high horsepower blower,” said Matthews.

**The evolution of customer-focused service**

When Roy Blackwell Enterprises started in 1997, it primarily served the oil and gas industry. As the company grew, it branched out to serve many industries that require precision alignment for their equipment.

Blackwell supplies mobile teams to provide services throughout the Southern United States. It tailors services to the customer’s specific needs and requirements by providing alignment teams to help support an in-house maintenance crew, assist outside contractors, and provide complete alignment services that minimize in-house involvement.

In addition to precision machinery alignment and installations, Blackwell also offers:

- Laser shaft alignment to help prevent problems due to vibration, bearing and coupling failure and mechanical wear to parts.
- Precision leveling services to keep high speed rotating equipment running at peak performance and avoid common maintenance problems like excessive axial vibration.
- On-site maintenance and repair services available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to help reduce production down time.

**Passion, dedication and partnership**

Growing up in Munford, Tennessee around an auto shop, Roy was always doing mechanic work. In 1969, he joined the Millwright Local before working with Grace Chemical for 11 years then Schering Plough for 9 years.

But it wasn’t until Blackwell read the laser equipment brochure that his future became clear. He recognized the amazing potential laser alignment would provide with its improved efficiency and technological advantages.

“I remember thinking, ‘This is what I want to do. I love this work. This is my life’s ambition,’” Blackwell said. “I haven’t looked back since.”

From the start of Roy Blackwell Enterprises to the present, SSMRC Local 1554 has been right by his side the whole way. But it’s more than just the skills and knowledge of the millwrights.

“The union has been like a family to me. We all look out for each other,” Blackwell said.

David Park believes “SSMRC’s conviction in training millwrights to understand the value of contractor partnerships has been a key to the successful relationship with Roy Blackwell Enterprises. We train our millwrights to not only take pride in their work but ownership of the project.”

The future continues to look bright for the company. Roy’s son, Thomas Blackwell, a natural born millwright himself, is now President of Roy Blackwell Enterprises. Vice President Larry Avist, who worked in the petrochemical industry for 30 years, is a newer addition to the company.

Blackwell says with the leadership in place and the manpower supplied by the SSMRC, he expects to continue providing his customers with the level of work they expect and deserve.