

Michigan Defense Expo Brings Together Military, Private Industry and Students

by Jim Stickford

Defense contractors, TARDEC employees and students all had the chance to mix and meet at the 2017 Michigan Defense Expo sponsored by the Michigan chapter of the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA).

The expo was held at the Warren branch of Macomb

Community College April 25-26.

Art Siirila, president of the Michigan NDIA, said the expo has become a big success.

"We have a record number of exhibitors here this year," Siirila said. "That's about 115. We will have a couple of thousand people walk through the expo during both its days."

Siirila said the event is impor-

tant because it gives people in the public and private defense sector the ability to get together and talk as well as network.

"As to the theme of this year's expo?" Siirila said. "Traditionally, each expo has a theme, but I'd say that this year there is no theme. Because there's so much

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The recent NDIA Michigan Defense Expo held at MCC's Warren campus was well-attended.

Tech Center News®

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Warren, Michigan 48093

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Deadline: Thursday 5:00 p.m.
for the next edition of Monday

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www.TechCenterNews.com

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going on in the world today, I'd say that this year's expo is allowing engineers and buyers who buy the engineers' products the opportunity to get together and talk, do some market research. It's a great networking event for everyone."

TACOM and TARDEC buy billions of dollars worth of goods and services every year, Siirila said. But the process is formal, and the chance to just talk to people in the industry is often not there.

"The expo evolves into something different every year," Siirila said. "That's important because threats and military technology are constantly changing and having an event that change with the times is important."

One of the groups that attended this year's expo was the Michigan Aerospace Manufacturers Association (MAMA). The group was represented by its founder and executive director Gavin Brown and its deputy director John Geisler.

Brown said MAMA was officially founded in 2007, but the roots of the organization go back to 2003.

"The aerospace industry was really gutted by 9/11," Brown said. "After the attack, the industry went flat the same way the auto industry did in 2008.

"Planes weren't flying and the commercial airlines had real problems.

"I live in Traverse City and work for MSP Aviation, which is based in Bloomington, Ind. After 9/11, I would visit Tier I aerospace suppliers and they'd all tell me the same thing, that they were crawling."

As a result many of the aerospace industry's Tier II and Tier III suppliers went out of business, Brown said. When things turned around, a lot of Tier I suppliers found out that the Tier II and III suppliers they depended on for specific parts had gone out of business.

Brown said that when aero-

space primes, which in the auto industry would be referred to as OEMs, needed parts, they'd contact him to see if he could help them. That need led to the creation of MAMA in 2007.

"We started out with 13 member companies," Brown said. "Now there are more than 150 member companies. They range in size from Boeing to mom-and-pop outfits that only employ a few people.

"Basically, we want to create a supply chain that can collaborate in the supplying of everything from hot engine parts to interior plane parts."

Geisler said that Michigan, at any one time, might have between 3,000 and 6,000 people working directly in the aerospace industry. A Price Waterhouse survey in 2015 ranked Michigan as second in attractiveness for aerospace companies. Florida was first.

"The reasons are many," Geisler said. "We have universities with excellent aerospace engineering programs. We have skilled manufacturers who are used to producing parts on a massive scale. There are taxes and regulations.

"Our goal is to keep that talent that graduates from U-M, MSU, Western Michigan and other schools from leaving Michigan. We think this a great state to live and work in. That's why having an event like this is great. We get to meet people, talk with them and help them find the skilled people they need to stay in business in Michigan."

Also attending the expo were students from Center Line High School, Fraser High School, Utica Community Schools, Lakeview Public High School in St. Clair Shores and Van Dyke Public Schools/Lincoln High School.

These students were invited to



Wrubel shows off a cell phone case produced by a 3D printer.

the expo so that they could see that there are jobs for people with STEM degrees and to meet and network with real people face-to-face instead of sending emails back and forth, said Rick Darter, Michigan NDIA STEM director.

"We think it's very important that students get exposed to the defense industry and that the defense industry gets to meet the potential next generation of talent," Darter said.

Jalaine Price, a computer drafting instructor at Lakeview High School, said even in this day and age, face-to-face offers benefits to students and businesses.

"It's so easy to ignore emails and resumes, but when an executive meets a bright, young student face-to-face, that student is remembered," Price said. "And it's never too early to learn how to effectively network."

One student attending was Jackson Wrubel, a sophomore at Lakeview High School. He is a

student in Price's drafting and design engineering class. To demonstrate just what the students were learning, Price brought a 3D printer that made on-demand customized phone cases and small husky (dog) prints made out of tooled plastic.

"The paw prints are popular," Price said. "They are tooled, in some places, to a depth of two millimeters. A lot of people have heard of 3D printing, but many have never actually seen such a printer in action.

"By showing how students can use this technology, we hope to get people in the defense industry interested in working with students."

Wrubel said he appreciated the opportunity to see what lies ahead should he choose a STEM career.

"This is my first time out of the classroom and in the real world of industrial design," Wrubel said. "It's nice to talk to people and learn about the industry."