

SOUTH SOUND BUSINESS

Annual Celebration Spotlights Washington's Makers

By Kris Johnson

Nov 3, 2022 Updated 21 hrs ago

Kris Johnson. Courtesy of the AWB.



Some of the world's finest companies are hiding in plain sight, right here in Washington.

They're inside industrial buildings and office parks that we drive by every day, often without a second look. They're in the heart of our metro areas, the outskirts of suburban communities and small towns from the Columbia River gorge to the Palouse — and everywhere in between.

The team at the Association of Washington Business recently spent six days on the road visiting some of Washington's most innovative makers as part of the sixth-annual AWB Manufacturing Week bus tour.

This year's tour visited nearly 30 manufacturers including Naked Prosthetics, an Olympia-based maker of custom prosthetics for people who are missing fingers or parts of a hand. In many cases, the prosthetics give users the ability to return to work.

"Our mission is to get people back to life," said CEO Bob Thompson.

In Tacoma, the bus stopped at Bates Technical College where students from Olympia High School joined the tour of the school's mechatronics and mechanical engineering program. A new partnership will allow high school graduates to get credit for the high-tech classes available in the program which prepares students for modern manufacturing jobs.

Some of the tour stops, like Altek, Inc. in Spokane, and Coriander Designs in Woodinville, started in a garage, like so many great American success stories including Hewlett-Packard and Amazon.

Others, like Analog Devices in Camas and Goodwinds Composites in Mount Vernon, have manufactured products that are currently on the planet Mars.

"This is an interplanetary business," said Goodwinds co-owner Amelia Cook.

The companies ranged in size from among the biggest manufacturers in the country, like Boeing's 737 production facility in Renton, and Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Richland, which is helping invent clean technology, to small operations like Island Machine, a husband-and-wife machine shop in Everett that makes parts for Boeing, and Skunk Brothers Spirits, a veteran-owned and operated craft distillery in Stevenson.

And they included young companies like Brinc, the fast-growing start-up in Seattle making state-of-the-art drones that are being used to search for people in war-torn Ukraine, and Mount Adams Fruit, a 106-year-old company in Bingen that sends its pears around the world. And did you know that the clip on the bag of bread in your pantry was invented by Kwik Lok, a third-generation woman-owned company in Yakima?

We are truly a state of makers.

This year, students joined the AWB group every day during the tour, getting an up-close look at modern manufacturing. And the bus visited innovative schools that are equipping the next generation of makers, schools like the new Vanguard Academy in Moses Lake, Bates Technical College in Tacoma, the mechatronics program at Clark College, and an innovative automotive technician program at Garfield-Palouse High School.

Once again, the AWB bus tour revealed that manufacturing is alive in Washington. It's already a major driver of the economy, and the state is working toward a goal of doubling the sector in a decade.

It's a great goal, but achieving it will require our leaders to make smart policy choices on issues like workforce, energy, and tax and regulatory policy.

We need to inspire the workforce of the future. We're going to need more energy, not less. Where will it come from and how much will it cost? And we need to ensure that Washington can compete with other states and regions.

These are big challenges, but they're worth solving. When manufacturing thrives, Washington thrives.

Kris Johnson is president of the Association of Washington Business, the state's chamber of commerce and manufacturers association.