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Retal molding plant gives struggling PA town another chance to shine

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Special to Plastics News

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Retal Industries Ltd.

Cyprus-based molder Retal picked a struggling town in Pennsylvania as its U.S. base in 2016. It has been a good choice for both the town and firm.



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Donora, Pa. — In 2016, Cyprus-based Retal Industries Ltd. decided to pick a former Spartech Corp. compounding plant in Pennsylvania as its first U.S. base.

Donora's nickname «home of the champions» proved to be as relevant today as it was in its 1950s heyday as the company's decision to locate there gave the community another chance.

While the well publicized difficulties of towns and communities throughout the rust belt are also true, the clear characteristics of hard work, loyalty and positivity shine through.

This undeniable spirit was one of the main pulls for global plastic packaging manufacturer Retal Industries decision to build in Donora, with the process of creating its factory and ensuring it quickly became successfully active gaining invaluable support from the local community.

Elizabeth Giecek, human resources manager at Retal PA LLC, joined the company in May 2017, and has a close understanding of how the community support allowed the business to find a happy home.

«I'm originally from about 35 minutes away from Donora, in Washington, and I've always been interested in the history of the valley. It used to be that each town had its own mill and there were plenty of good jobs for regular people, but as the mills started pulling out it got harder,» she said.

«Steel production started to decline from the early 1980s, and it was also that pollution became more of an issue throughout the valley. So the tone changed; people and families needed to leave to find jobs, and young people graduated and left,» she said.

But while the tone of Donora and its neighboring towns changed, that local pride and expectation of hard work remained.

Virtuous circle

Production Manager Matthew Durka is a popular face throughout Retal as it's joked that «he came with the building.» He worked at the plant under the previous owner. He's also a Donora local and a vocal advocate of the virtuous circle created by a global manufacturer choosing Donora as its first U.S. home.

«Everyone knows everyone in Donora. That means we know there have been hard times for many people, as it's not been easy to find work,» Durka said. «But there are so many skilled people, people with great manufacturing skills and real knowledge of production.

«When I heard that a new plastic packaging company was coming here, to the site that I knew, I reached out to the original general manager that I knew from way back and said I was really interested in joining. He gave me an opportunity and I've been here since 2017 when the facility opened; I'd worked here for 15 years before that, working on the first injection molding machine,» he said.

Durka explains how Donora's population has decreased from around 40,000 in the 1950s to just over 4,000 today, with many families struggling financially as well as emotionally due to the lack of long-term work.

«I grew up just four miles away from this site; I could hear the sounds of the machine floating over the valley. I have a real sense of home working here and I'm so proud to be bringing up my daughter here with my wife,» he said. «So many people want to stay in Donora with their families too, but of course it's difficult when there are not enough jobs. So to know that a big manufacturer like Retal has committed to this town is great; it's great for the company too, because they have access to a skilled, loyal workforce with the right motivation to get active. Plastic packaging has long been manufactured in Donora, so there are experienced people here.»

From Retal's global headquarters in Cyprus, analysis was undertaken over some time to assess the best possible location for its first U.S. factory, with various potential locations considered and a shortlist drawn up of all those that met the economic and environmental criteria.

Giecek adds: «It was imperative that the chosen location had the right support of the local government and community as well as the right location in practical terms; it needed to be near good transport links as well as easily accessible for the multinational food and beverage brand names that Retal produces plastic packaging for. Thankfully, Donora ticked all the boxes.»

Kotula County strong

The support of Washington County Chamber of Commerce has been an important element in bringing together the enthusiastic people of Donora with the practical decision makers at Retal. Jeff Kotula, president of Washington County Chamber of Commerce, was instrumental in illustrating the many positive attributes of Donora and the Mon Valley region.

«As a traditional town that was predominately driven by the steel industry, Donora used to be a prosperous town, with plenty of large manufacturers and all manner of local businesses,» Kotula said. «With the decline of steel, lots of businesses were affected, especially retail, commercial, then residential. But Washington County has a strong strategy to diversify our economy and we've been determined to retain both the strength of our manufacturing and the strength of our character.»

Kotula continues explaining how local government-based diversification has helped to attract new large-scale manufacturing to the area.

Kotula and his team met with Retal representatives to explain how Donora would be a mutually beneficial location for its factory.

«We have people with high technology competence and we have an increasingly robust local economy,» Kotula said. «Yes, we have some financial incentives through the Economic Development Relocation project, but they are available in a large number of U.S. locations; Retal could have chosen any number of places. We've got something special to offer here; we're a partner to our local businesses, we serve our businesses, so it's a good fit for the company and the county.»

That good fit has seen Kotula introduce the Retal team to the local mayor to ensure that all relevant legislation is clearly understood, offered resources to support the company in terms of recruitment, and delivered ongoing advice on local issues. Kotula adds, «It's not a transactional relationship, here in Washington County we all work together.»

Today, the CEO and President of Retal PA is Darius Janulionis, a Lithuanian who has brought his accessible, results-driven management style to the company, following his relocation from Retal's largest European facility. Janulionis is proud to be part of such a progressive, motivated team, with his approach a welcome match for the Donora factory.

«This move has been a huge change for me and I have been welcomed by everyone; there's a real sense that we're making something good happen, together,» Janulionis said. «I have brought with me an open approach, I trust my team to deliver because they know what they're doing. This community has been welcoming too, and I plan to be a more active part of the local business community once the COVID measures allow us to.»

«In the three years since Retal has been operational in Donora, we have exceeded the targets set for us, which is entirely thanks to the positive attitude and the hard work of our team. I am delighted that Retal chose Donora for our first U.S. plant, it's been a good decision for everyone.»

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