

Hot hoods that don't burn

Lehighton company puts pizzazz in fire-rated gear

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A firefighter's worse fear is the flash - when a door opens and a burst of scolding heat hits him or her like an exploding flashbulb. That's when the right hood can save a life.

Making the right hood is the business of Majestic Fire Apparel of Lehighton. This company, soon to celebrate its tenth anniversary, specializes in fire and safety hoods made out of high tech fibers like Nomex, PBI and Kevlar.

In Lehighton, which has lost many of its needle-trade jobs to the South and the Orient, Majestic has more than bucked the trend. Not only have they survived, but they have been continuously expanding to the point where they have to limit their growth in order to maintain their high quality standards.

Majestic specializes in safety and fire hoods. The hoods are similar in design to balaclavas or ski masks. They cover the head, and optionally part of the shoulders, with a fire resisting fabric. There is a sewn cutout opening for the eyes and nose.

While Majestic's primary market is to firefighters, where fire hoods must meet stringent National Fire Protection Association requirements, testing by Underwriter's Laboratories, and ISO 9001 Quality Certification, their safety hoods, designed to the same standards, are sold to welders, electricians, racecar drivers, and members of the military.

With a company of 20 to 25 people, Majestic currently produces over 200,000 hoods annually plus a variety of flame resistant long underwear and a line of personal accountability accessories.

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The company was conceived by Greg Frantz, currently the operations manager at Majestic. In 1997, a fire-resistant hood company that Frantz was working for, was leaving the area. Greg liked the business and saw a way of creating a similar business-but one that would succeed.

He identified lead-time as a problem. The industry was quoting two to three months delivery time. The longest portion of this time was the production of the fabric from the fiber. Greg wanted to build a just-in-time production system. His solution-control both the knitting and the sewing.

Frantz contacted his high school friend, Mike Leggett - currently president of Majestic, and offered him the opportunity of investing in a fire-resistant hood business. Leggett agreed and helped create a business plan. They rented a small space at Emcee Knitwear on Wagner St. in Lehigh. In 1999, they added the most recent member of their management team, sales manager Janeane Matula.

At first their knitting machinery, sewing machines, stock area and office area easily fit into a space about one tenth of the building. Over time, they renegotiated for one third, then one half of the building, finally purchasing the building.

From the beginning, Majestic's just-in-time production system proved a winning idea. By owning the knitting equipment and the sewing equipment, they could produce the fabric one day and sew it the next. What had been a two to three month shipping cycle was reduced to five days.

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Majestic chose to market to distributors and displayed at trade shows to interest distributors. "Years ago, everybody made white, yellow, brown hoods," said Leggett. "One day somebody said to me, 'Why are you different from the other guys that I am buying from?' I told him about the on-time delivery, better quality, and better price. The things you are supposed to say. He said, 'You really need to come out with something that sets you apart.'"

The following year, as a novelty, Frantz produced a red, white and blue striped hood. "People stopped in their tracks," Leggett said. "Firemen always saw white or the three colors. They stopped and said, 'Oh my gosh, what is it?'"

Leggett responded, "It just shows what we can do. We are also knitters. We know how to blend colors."

From this lark, in each following year, Majestic released a new color or design. They learned to post-dye their hoods and released camouflage designs for hunters and tie-dyed hoods "for fire fighters who remember the 60s and 70s."

As a breast cancer awareness fundraiser for women firefighters, they produced a pink fire hood. It drew a winning bid of \$750, and they knew they had another winning design. Majestic also perfected a process to embroider the hoods using fire-resistant Nomex thread.

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Majestic recently began introducing products that make a person more visible. They call these - personal accountability products. One product, a safety vest with flashing lights, is intended for road crews who need to be more visible, especially at night.

For more information, see: www.majesticfireapparel.com.