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Low-profile manufacturer high on the U.P.

DORIS HOLMSTROM | WEDNESDAY, JULY 18, 2012



Creative Composites Inc. keeps a low profile. The company is housed in a nondescript, one-story gray metal building on the side of the road on U.S. 2 and U.S. 41 at the western edge of Rapid River. The building is unmarked except for placards reading "No Admittance," "No Smoking "

Owner and president Brad McPhee says there's no need for expensive signage; the company doesn't sell locally—and its biggest customers prefer to keep their business as quiet as they can.

[Creative Composites](#) makes things like vehicular armor, ballistic panels, covers and containers, mainly for the U.S. military and military contractors. It also engineers the composites—determining the just-right combination of resins and fibers—used to fabricate those products to be as lightweight, strong and cost-effective as possible.

The company started in 1994 as an engineering firm, while McPhee, a Garden native, was still a graduate student at Wayne State University in Detroit. He moved it to the Upper Peninsula and began manufacturing in 1996, with the help of a few investors and a Small Business Administration-guaranteed loan. That was shortly after he helped engineer and design a viable land combat vehicle out of composite materials. (Think fiberglass, for example, but "much stronger.")

That first plant was located in Manistique; Creative Composites moved to the 20-acre site in Rapid River four years later.

The company is based in the U.P., not because of the advantages offered by location—beyond the comparatively low cost of labor—but because it's home.

"It's as simple as that. Downstate was exciting, the work was fun, the money was very good, but it was never dark, never quiet and you could just never get away from a lot of people," he says.

Now that Creative Composites is here, he says he thinks of himself as a "community steward, providing jobs that people can support families on in this area."

It was a happy coincidence that he found himself in a government-certified HUBZone (Historically Underutilized Business Zone) in Delta County; sales have benefited, as a result. Right now he describes business as "comfortably steady," saying he and his two dozen employees work hard to keep value high and prices low.

"Our quality, our mindset of being aggressive in terms of trying new things—that keeps us out front a little bit," he says. The company is also ISO 9000-certified.

At the same time, McPhee recognizes a need to diversify and grow the business, and has started exploring opportunities in the commercial and industrial arenas, in particular. The company's website is being redeveloped to that end, to help improve marketing, with support from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's Pure Michigan Business Connect Economic Gardening Pilot Program.

The advanced structural composites industry is "still really in its infancy," he says. "The thing I'm excited about is that there are only a few major new land vehicle systems programs getting geared up to go into the next stage of prototypes or into early-rate production and we are somewhat involved in most of them."

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