

Big 2010 dream pays off

2010: City firm beats giants by focusing on sustainability

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A small, family-owned, east Vancouver business has proved that the Olympic buck can stop here rather than going to multinational companies.

For when it came to providing Vancouver 2010 with office supplies, Mills Basics' track record of hiring disadvantaged people from the Downtown Eastside as well as its environmentally friendly work ethic won the company the equivalent of a gold medal.

"We're a family business in a business that is owned by big corporations like Grand and Toy, Staples and Office Depot," said CEO Brad Mills. "It shows you don't have to be a big-bucks, American guy to win something."

Mills says that when the Vancouver 2010 bid papers came across his desk and he saw a paragraph highlighting "sustainability," he knew his company was in with a chance.

"We believe we were successful because of our employment commitment to the Downtown Eastside and because of our involvement with charities and giving back to the community," said Mills. "We're big on the environment and recycling programs."

In the past four years, Mills has hired 14 people through a hiring program aimed at giving a leg up to the downtrodden people in the Downtown Eastside.

"We've had people who've been involved with drugs, alcohol, the penal system," he said. "Of the 14, we probably have seven now who are still here. We try not to judge anybody, as long as they come through the program and come from the Downtown Eastside."

The company was started in Gastown in 1949 by Mills' father Don.

It now sits at Clark Drive and Napier Street, has 89 employees and enjoys annual sales of just over \$14 million.

One of its biggest clients is the City of Vancouver, which it has been supplying for 12 years.

The company has become something of a poster child for the power of sustainability when the Vancouver 2010 Olympic organizing committee conducts seminars on opportunities for local businesses.

Supplying pens, pencils, notebooks, paper and other office supplies to VANOC for the past two years has meant Mills has been able to add the equivalent of 1.5 full-time jobs.



Mohamed Moussa 'picks and packs' items at Mills Basics, an office-supply store and 2010 supplier in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, as CEO Brad Mills looks on. JON MURRAY — THE PROVINCE

It's hard to estimate how much the dollar value is, said Mills, as the staff of VANOC is rapidly growing. Right now, it sits at about 300 but will grow to between 1,200 and 1,400 by 2010. As well, office supplies may be needed by many of the 25,000 volunteers needed for 2010.

Mills has won the contract to print VANOC's letterhead, business cards and envelopes.

"I knew I would be up against the big guys — I'm up against them every day," said Mills. "When we won it, we threw a party for the staff. We got cakes and videos and balloons and launched it all at once to let them know we'd won the contract. It was pretty magical."

Ann Duffy, VANOC's program director for sustainability, said Olympic organizers weren't just interested in price and quality but in a commitment to sustainability and the environment.

"We had a strong short list of seven bidders," she said. "We were quite excited that a small

family-owned business in Vancouver's own inner city really set the bar high in terms of having some strong attributes. At the time, Mills had seven full-time employees from Vancouver's inner city, so they were employing directly from one of the target communities VANOC is trying to bring business and opportunities to."

For Mohamed Moussa, Mills' hiring policy has meant a steady job on the "pick-and-pack" line at the company warehouse.

Moussa, 42, came to Canada in 1994 from Comoros Island, off the east coast of Africa.

"First of all, I had the language barrier," he said. "I had to take some classes and did some volunteer work to make connections."

Three years ago, Moussa came to Mills through what was then called the "Fast Tracks to Employment" program in the Downtown Eastside. "It's a good place to work," he said.

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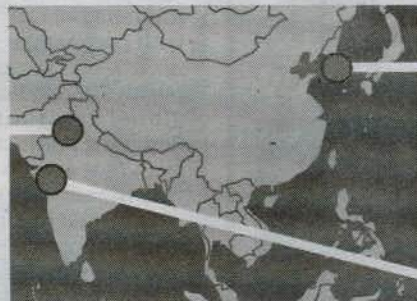
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INDIA

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The Tokyo-based maker of cars and motorcycles is in the process of select-



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