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Bob Nichols, Kettering's vice president of corporate relations and enrollment, presents Gill Industries Chair and CEO Rita Williams with Kettering University's 2004 Co-op Employer of the Year Award.

## Gill Earns Employer Award

By Anne Bond Emrich

GRAND RAPIDS — Gill Industries received the 2004 Kettering University West Michigan Co-op Employer of the Year Award recently for its ongoing work with Kettering students.

The university selected Gill Industries from a pool of more than 30 West Michigan companies based on Gill's partnership in and support of Kettering's professional co-op program, which combines traditional classroom work with "real world" on-the-job experience.

Flint-based Kettering is one of only a handful of educational institutions in the country offering a professional co-op program where students spend their four years of college alternating every three months between attending classes on campus and working full-time for employers.

The school gives its annual Employer of the Year award to a company that has not only demonstrated continued support of the co-op program, but has shown "exceptional" commitment to student development, as well as a commitment to ensure "a successful educational experience" for students.

Gill Industries has been involved in Kettering's co-op program since 1988.

"Gill knows how to be successful in the world markets, yet feels that it's important to take the time and effort needed to employ, train and develop



young Kettering University students into successful, accomplished professionals,” said Armen Oumedian, a Kettering alumnus.

Gill Industries CEO and Chair Rita Williams said the partnership with Kettering is a “win-win” for both Gill and the students.

“They get to work at a great company and get real life experiences and we get employees that are invaluable to us. When they graduate they are already trained and skilled in our procedures and processes and they can bring creativity and innovation to Gill on day one of their employment,” she said.

Bob Nichols, the university’s vice president of corporate relations and enrollment, said a number of students stay and work for their co-op employer after graduation, and that’s “the true test” of the Kettering program.

Nine Kettering alumni work for Gill Industries, Williams noted. The company currently has four Kettering students in its co-op program, and students Fred Brushaber, Brienne Conner and Kevin Langworthy talked to those attending the celebration about the “Kettering experience” and the various types of work they’re involved in at Gill.

West Michigan has been “beat about the head and shoulders” with a lot of bad news, such as a 7 percent unemployment rate, the loss of companies like Federal Mogul, Electrolux and Life Savers, and heavy hits in the furniture industry, said Bob Roth, president and CEO of RoMan Manufacturing, chair of the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, a Kettering alumnus and a co-op education partner.

He pointed to research that shows the United States lost 2 million manufacturing jobs between 1995 and 2002.

“The part that doesn’t get reported is that China — that country that’s supposed to be taking all our jobs — lost 15 million manufacturing jobs in that exact same period of time,” he noted.

“What is sometimes overlooked and doesn’t get talked about are things like productivity, innovation and competition.”

Roth explained that since World War II, manufacturing employment at the national level has been relatively stable, with percentage fluctuations in the single digits. Yet over that same period of time, manufacturing output increased 600 percent.

“Now how in the world does that happen? Innovation, productivity and competition,” he repeated.

Roth pointed out the fact that West Michigan:

- Ranks No. 3 on the World of Knowledge Competitive Index, which compares 129 regions around the world.
- Is No. 1 on the index in research and development per capita.
- Ranks No. 10 among the 129 regions for automotive and mechanical

engineering employment.

- Is No. 1 on the index for private equity investment.
- Ranks No. 2 on the index for charitable giving. Fully 10 percent of household income is given back to the community through churches and nonprofits.

“I think that one maybe speaks loudest about West Michigan,” Roth said of the latter fact. “It speaks to the strength of West Michigan.”

On the national level, he continued, West Michigan:

- Has the highest concentration of manufacturing per capita, with 23 percent of the work force employed in manufacturing.
- Is No. 1 in the nation in office systems.
- Is No. 2 in the nation in the automotive supplier business.
- Is No. 4 in the nation in advanced metalworking.
- Is No. 6 in the nation in the printing sector.
- Is No. 12 in the nation in the life sciences.

“Life sciences are up and coming. Tell me that’s not technical,” Roth remarked. “We’re No. 12 in the nation already, and it’s really an area where West Michigan grew a foundation from the seed of the Van Andel Institute. There are going to be all kinds of new opportunities and jobs around life sciences, and West Michigan is poised to be a leader in that area.”

Manufacturing will continue to have challenges in the years ahead, Roth predicts. He suggests people keep in mind that at the turn of the last century everybody was moving from the farm to the city to work in manufacturing jobs. At the time, 50 percent of the U.S. population worked in agriculture; today less than 3 percent work in agriculture yet U.S. agricultural production is 1,000-fold what it was at the turn of the 20th century.

“Manufacturing is going to have to grapple with those same things,” Roth said. “There will be this movement in the types of jobs. The important part is how do we get prepared for those changes?”

He and others in the industry believe the future lies in innovation, which can only be sustained by people with a solid technical background. The jobs of tomorrow will require math, science, engineering and communications skills, Roth said.

“Since 1919 Kettering has been focused on just that. The idea is there has to be a practical application to the things we learn in the classroom and the laboratory. Students that go through Kettering will be poised to do that very, very important work.”

Kettering, formerly known as General Motors Institute, has partnered with industry for 85 years, serving as a training center for major industrial corporations. Its tie-in with industry remains today, as does its focus on training future business professionals to meet the real world needs of business. The university offers nine B.S degrees that include concentrations, specialties and cognate study areas.

Hundreds of companies across the nation are now involved in the university's co-op program, about 30 of them West Michigan manufacturers, according to Roth. **BJX**

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