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Woolpert Focuses on Philanthropy

GRASS-ROOTS CARING

Dayton, Ohio-based Woolpert finds innovative ways to boost local philanthropic efforts

BY CALVIN HENNICK

As a national architecture, engineering and geospatial (AEG) firm, Woolpert seemingly does a little bit of everything—or, almost everything. And the company's philanthropic efforts are no different. Employees at the firm, which is based in Dayton, Ohio, and has 26 offices around the country, work together on a volunteer Green Team that plants trees, cleans up roads and rivers, removes invasive species and tackles other environmental projects. Fellow employees also participate in an annual 48-mile bike ride to raise money for Alzheimer's research, juvenile diabetes and other causes. Some organize a holiday giving tree for Hannah's Treasure Chest, a nonprofit group that provides care packages for kids in need. And still others run in a number of charity-supporting races.

The one thing the initiatives all have in common: They generate much-needed support for the communities where Woolpert employees live and work.

"Our philosophy centers around our mission, which is to help our employees, our clients and our world to progress, to move forward through forward thinking," says Scott Cattran, CEO and president of Woolpert. "That is the purpose of the company; it is in the hearts of our employees and guides us with respect to where we focus our philanthropy."

Woolpert budgets \$32,000 each year for its philanthropic programming, but Steve Phipps, chairman of the company's board of directors, estimates that in-kind donations bring the total annual number as high as \$80,000.

"It's grass roots," Phipps says. "People are passionate about a cause, and we look to help them with their passion."

He says that, in addition to aiding charitable organizations, Woolpert's community service programs help to create meaningful bonds between the company and others.

"The people that we're working with are, many times, our clients, too," Cattran adds. "We love



WOOLPERT



PLANE PULL/FACEBOOK



Woolpert Engineer Designer Doug Liening helps build the firm's Cincinnati Construction entry. Cincinnati Construction is part of an international Construction charity effort in which architecture and engineering firms design and build elaborate public structures out of canned goods, which are then donated to local hunger relief organizations. The Woolpert team used 3,300 cans of corn, green beans and chili beans to replicate Cincinnati's famous "3-Way" Skyline Chili dish.

Woolpert employees (from left) IT Team Leader Kevin Pierce, Transportation Market Director Tom Mochty, and Geospatial and Aviation Practice Leader Thomas Mackie participate in the Plane Pull at Dayton International Airport. The event raises money for Special Olympics Ohio.



Nadja Turek, an environmental engineer and sustainable design expert at Woolpert, helps the company team remove invasive honeysuckle from Glen Helen Nature Preserve in Yellow Springs, Ohio.



WOOLPERT



The Woolpert cycling team takes part in the annual Young's Ice Cream Charity Bike Tour, raising money for multiple charities including the Alzheimer's Association and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. Woolpert was named one of the top fundraising teams in 2016.

what we do, and this goes far beyond working on projects. At Woolpert, we want to make our world a better place, and when we can give back to the community while working shoulder-to-shoulder with our clients, that just makes us very fortunate people.”

SUPPORTING STEM

And Woolpert's community involvement extends to mentoring future engineers—with one small caveat.

“We don't build robots,” says Thomas Mackie, geospatial and aviation practice leader and vice president at Woolpert.

The firm does, however, support BONDS (Bringing Opportunities Near Dayton Students) Robotics, a Dayton-area group that

engages in FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) robotics competitions.

Through FIRST, which was founded by inventor and entrepreneur Dean Kamen, kids team up to build and program industrial-sized robots that compete in field games. The students must follow strict rules and use limited resources, and in addition to building their robots, they must raise funds, design their team brand and hone their teamwork skills—all under a six-week time limit.

“It teaches kids a tremendous amount,” says Mackie. “It allows kids to work through a real-life engineering project. It's pretty cool.”

The program fits with other Woolpert efforts to support STEM education. The firm's employees also provide students at a regional STEM school with feedback on their portfolios and speak at schools about a variety of STEM topics, and Woolpert sponsors a number of scholarships. But the company needed to find a way to support the robotics team without providing technical expertise.

Ultimately, in addition to providing financial support, Woolpert opted to help the kids with marketing and technical writing—skills that help them garner additional sponsorships for their team.

“We wanted to participate however we could best help,” Mackie says. “We also have a lot of relationships in the area, and we help

Responding to Disaster

In 2015, when the largest rainfall event ever to hit the midlands of South Carolina put much of the region underwater, Woolpert responded with a unique form of assistance.

As soon as the storm clouds cleared, the company sent an airplane up to capture aerial images of the damage in order to assist local officials with their response. The plane then continued to Woolpert's Dayton headquarters, where employees processed the images and prepared them for public viewing online. The firm donated its services.

“We did this to help,” says Brian Bates, a Woolpert project director. “We had an airplane. It was needed. Nobody else was going to be able to provide this. We're part of the community, and we acted just like a neighbor would act.”



Woolpert collected high-resolution aerial imagery immediately following the catastrophic flooding that hit South Carolina in October 2015 and presented it alongside its previously collected imagery via website and app to assist local government officials and the public in disaster relief efforts.



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"We're a large company, but we have a family-oriented culture."

THOMAS MACKIE |
WOOLPERT

these students get introduced and acquire more sponsorships from folks in our industry."

DESIGNING FOR A CAUSE

Earlier this year when Woolpert opened an office in Cincinnati, the company was looking for a way of introducing itself in the community.

That's where Canstruction, an international organization with city-based charitable contests, came into play.

Architecture and engineering firms design and then build elaborate public sculptures out of canned goods, which are then donated to food banks—and this friendly competition has resulted in the donation of about 50 million pounds of food since 1992.

Woolpert signed on to participate in Cincinnati Canstruction relatively late in the game, and so employees wanted

to find a design that would be simple enough to execute while still being a creative expression of the firm's new city.

The team settled on trying to replicate one of the city's signature dishes: A "3-Way" from the famous Skyline Chili—that's a plate of spaghetti, topped with chili and then topped again with a heaping portion of shredded cheddar cheese.

"It started as a joke," says Alena Miller, an architectural designer in Woolpert's Dayton office, who coordinated the effort. "But then the concept grew and we thought about it and said, 'This makes sense.' It was something that was recognizable to people in the area and slightly comical, too."

The team kept the design simple, using 1,100 cans each of corn, green beans and chili beans to bring their bowl of chili to life. The green beans, which came in a white-labeled can, formed the base layer of pasta. The chili beans represented the chili while the corn was used to create the cheese.

"Supporting our local community through food donation was the first priority, and the design was second," says Miller. "We chose three staple food items that are likely found in a typical Midwestern home."

And that thoughtfulness doesn't go unnoticed.

"This is the kind of project you have to squeeze in between your daily job," says Stephanie Kirschner, co-chair of Cincinnati Canstruction. "You're working nights and weekends. For any team to say yes to this project warms my heart because they're willing to go above and beyond."



"People are passionate about a cause, and we look to help them with their passion."

STEVE PHIPPS |
WOOLPERT

Woolpert employees raised more than \$2,400 to buy the food, with some of them engaging in a friendly competition among departments and senior leadership to see who would donate the most. One person gave \$500, says Miller. For some, she says, the effort was personal. "[An employee] felt it was their way of giving back because of past experiences they had in their life," Miller says. "At one point they needed assistance of some kind, so it was an opportunity to help others with a similar need."

PULLING THEIR WEIGHT

Twenty Woolpert employees stand on the tarmac at Dayton International Airport, gripping an anchor rope. They wait for the signal, ready to begin pulling with all their might.

At the other end of the rope is a McDonnell Douglas MD-90 airliner.

The whistle blows, and within six or seven seconds, the crew has dragged the airplane across the finish line, 12 feet from the start. And in the span of those few seconds and those few yards, hundreds of dollars have been raised for Special Olympics Ohio.

"The Plane Pull is the optical part of it," says Mackie. "The real activity is to generate sponsorships, to collect money through donations. When you sign up and agree to come out for the day, you are also establishing a goal for yourself. Every participant has the opportunity to solicit donations from friends, family, whoever."

"When I establish a team, I put \$2,000 down as our goal," Mackie says. "We blow that out of the water every year."

Mackie was introduced to the Plane Pull several years ago when a client asked if he'd like to participate in the event in Cleveland. His reply: Absolutely.

That event got him on the organizers' email list, where he learned more about the Dayton version of the Plane Pull. "I jumped on it, and we put together a team," he says.

Woolpert competes in both the men's and coed divisions of the Plane Pull. Across the two divisions in which it competes, Woolpert has finished first, second and third in the pull in various years.

"We come back with hardware every year," Mackie says with pride. "We're competing against CrossFit groups, against gyms, against other companies in the area. It's fun."

The event also has a personal connection for Mackie, whose nephew has Down syndrome. And meaningful service like Mackie's is an important part of the philanthropy at Woolpert, and, according to Mackie, the company does a good job of encouraging and providing support for those charitable efforts.

"We're a large company, but we have a family-oriented culture," Mackie says. "For just about everything we do, we get financial support, and we get a lot of participation as a company. It's a whole kaleidoscope of things—things people are really emotional about and passionate about." ■

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Calvin Hennick is a business, technology and travel writer based in Milton, Massachusetts.