

# A Family Affair

## Faith, Determination and Entrepreneurial Spirit Guides Jim Bradac and Family

by Shelley Hawes



Bradac will officially launch his entire product line one year after the 2008 World of Concrete.

photos by Nickolas Rapaz

Jim Bradac, in an attempt to solve his problem laying cabin footings in wet soil conditions, invented a solution that may revolutionize the future of pouring concrete. With seven young children at home, an eighth on the way, and mom dedicated to home schooling each one, Bradac took \$45,000 out of the family savings and put his dream of manufacturing a better concrete form in motion.

At Ceme-tube's inception, Bradac operated a thriving business "Prestige Sheet Metal Incorporated" which designed, fabricated and installed commercial restaurant equipment for large clients such as Sysco, Reinhardt, Culvers, and Target stores. His lucrative career in stainless steel fabrication demanded a lot of time and energy, conflicting with demands of starting up a manufacturing empire. After spending three years preparing Ceme-Tube to launch to the industry, Bradac closed Prestige Sheet Metal, which supported his family for over seventeen years.

"In January 2007, I entered my first trade show ever and it worked out to be the grand daddy of them all, The World of Concrete." Not officially in business yet, Bradac described how he followed his intuition and belief that he was actually on to something,

and took it one step further.

"I only had six prototype 8" tubes and my purpose was to feel out the public and try to generate interest. I literally had people at my booth at all times. I remember having trouble leaving for a rest room break or even getting a quick bite of a sandwich I made in the booth. In a sense, I was blown away by the response." He describes the moment his dream of success became a reality. While observing the outpouring of interest, a neighboring exhibitor approached Bradac and asked, "You're not in Kansas anymore are you?"

"The competition eventually heard about what we had and they all paid a visit." Sonoco's Vice-President visited and stated that 'she was shocked to see a product like ours on the market.' I told her it was a new product. She asked if we would ever be willing to merge with their products.

"I'll never forget when she asked," recalls Bradac. "I politely declined her offer. I didn't understand at this time the many aspects of this new business, but this was my

"Even our four-year old daughter, Gemma was pushing tubes across the floor. I couldn't pay warehouse workers; the entire family unloaded the trucks."

invention, and I wanted to see what the future held for Ceme-Tube."

This was no small concession. Sonoco Products Co., maker of Sonotubes, reported revenue of \$3.66 billion last year.

"After the WOC, we moved ahead as quickly as possible with manufacturing designs and mold production. We began mold production in March and acquired a 20,000 sq. foot warehouse in Hudson, Wisconsin. Financing the enterprise without investors or going public was a high-risk proposition. "It was scary spending more on just one of the six molds than I spent on our first home"

Bradac secured a home equity loan, along with loans against his previous company. He took advantage of low interest introductory credit card rates of 1.9% interest, and maxed out five lines of credit. "You must be on your toes, you can not make a late payment," he warns. We literally tapped into every available financial resource we had.

When he initially acquired the large warehouse at 2907 Harvey St. in Hudson Wisconsin, the \$8,000 monthly rent began eating up Bradac's financing. "The overhead has been difficult in our humble beginnings, but we are treading water until the WOC and the upcoming building season. Our biggest suppliers: Graybar, WhiteCap, and Cemstone, have all written letters of intent that they are proud to carry our products.

The Bradacs have gracefully and patiently weathered many setbacks in both financing and the manufacturing of Ceme-Tubes, without ever letting the obstacles stand in the way of ultimate success.

Innumerable start-up costs went with the warehouse. A new communications system for phone service and internet had to be installed, while computers, printers and office supplies purchased. Forklifts and a large array of shipping materials also needed to be purchased. The entire family pitched in to help paint the office, lay carpet and furnish the space with desks and furniture. "I couldn't pay warehouse workers; the entire family unloaded the trucks. Even our four-year old daughter, Gemma was pushing tubes across the floor."



In April of 2007, Bradac applied with local government for financial backing. This \$100,000 low-interest, flexible loan would allow him to repay his credit cards and home equity loan. Promising the St. Croix County government he would keep the warehouse in St. Croix County, with the ultimate goal of expansion and growth, Bradac guaranteed a tax base and employment opportunities to the small town. The benefits to the county far exceeded the risk and the loan seemed like a sure bet.

To satisfy application requirements, Bradac invested another \$3,000 in accountants to draft a five-year business plan and revenue projections. The loan officer who was assigned to Ceme-Tube understood construction and manufacturing, but left his position with St. Croix Economic Development Corp. and was replaced by someone less confident in the long-term benefits Ceme-Tube assured to St. Croix County. The loan was denied six long months later in October of 2007.

In addition to financial, "We had many obstacles pertaining to the molding and manufacturing of Ceme-Tube, but moved ahead with these as smoothly and quickly as possible. It's been a really stressful year, all from the manufacturing end," recalls Bradac.

Bradac hired a contract designer to help design the tube molds. Matt Kusz of Kusz Industrial Design and Engineering Services was selected based on his expertise and followed through exceptionally well. Although when Bradac selected a manufacturer that had the capacity to keep up with his vision, manufacturing setbacks surfaced quickly.

"I was working with a manufacturer in Iowa and was told in May their robotics would not trim the tubes in the manufacturing process as they had originally thought." Bradac was informed that he would need to supply a custom machine to cut the ends of each tube after being molded. The machine was complex as it had to trim the 8" tubes as well as the 30" tubes. "I didn't have \$50,000 to spend on a machine so I built it myself," describes Bradac. With his Father being an engineer and his brother a machinist, the three set out to design and build the "Ceme-tube Trimming Fixture" in the workplace of Prestige Sheet Metal Incorporated.

"Being I had some engineering and a lot of metal fabrication in my previous business, I decided to build this complex machine myself. It took a month or so to make the custom trimming machine and I delivered it to the Iowa facility in July. Finally,

tube production would begin. "We had some other unforeseen manufacturing issues but worked through them." Color match problems occurred with our Light Pole and Bollard products and several early Ceme-Tube shipments had to be declined due to product quality.

"I intentionally did not push sales on Ceme-Tube until I knew we would have inventory. I didn't want to create a demand and not have the product to provide." Our first year was dedicated to solving any and all

issues that tend to arise with the beginning of a new product.

In late July Bradac was invited by Fine Homebuilding Magazine in Connecticut for an all expense paid opportunity to interview for their magazine. Fine Homebuilding was very impressed with Ceme-Tube and in addition to running a feature editorial, they may also include them in their largest selling issue, the annual Decks issue.

"I get rays of hope all the time," smiles Bradac. The two newest products introduced, the Ceme-Tube Light Pole Base and Bollard Models, are proving to be their two biggest sellers. Graybar Electric, a Fortune 500 company, picked up the lines with the promise to take the Light Pole and Bollard Models nationwide to over 250 stores. One Graybar executive has stated "I think we have stumbled onto something big". Graybar is the leading supplier of parking lot lighting, and the Light Pole Ceme-Tube is a natural companion to each light pole sold.

Another salesman for Graybar approached General Contractor Mortenson Company for use on the Twins stadium project, which will be determined soon. Contracts are also under review for Target, Best Buy stores, and the extensive rebuilding of the entire Iron Range in Northern Minnesota. "We're finally getting our break, and the word is getting out," Bradac exclaimed.

In a practical move, Bradac invested large sums for advertisements in Sweets and Arcat, the two leading information sources for architects, and to date Ceme-tube products have been specified on projects by architects more than 115 times.

"Being featured in the Saint Paul Pioneer Press was another highlight. I have been working as hard as possible to be successful with

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"I didn't want to create a demand and not have the product to provide."



"Ceme-tube is our life." 15-year old Joe Bradac tosses a football to his younger brother.



A scooter is a valuable means of transportation in the vast ocean of Ceme-tubes.



With many hours often spent at the warehouse, and wide open spaces, there's plenty of wheeled vehicles to spin around on.

Ceme-Tube. I get absolutely nothing but excited interest in our products and I know it is only a matter of time. I have high hopes for this upcoming building season.”

Bradac fulfilling his dream, it seems, is just around the corner, and he expects it will officially launch the entire product line at the 2008 World of Concrete, one year after Ceme-tube's introduction. “The 2008 WOC show will hopefully be our biggest boost. We have improved our product lineup and our display greatly from last year. I have mounted a light pole on one of our Light Pole Ceme-Tube's. This is a working light pole and will demonstrate how nice our products look in an actual installation.”

When reflecting on family and his out-

look on life since this journey began, Bradac claims, “The success of Ceme-Tube has become an important factor in our family's life, and the whole family is dedicated to help. God has guided me down this road and I have faith that it's going to succeed. When asked how his faith and belief in God has strengthened his mission, Bradac replies, “We are a Catholic family and take example from the words of St. Padre Pio, who always taught to “Pray, hope, and don't worry.” “Our faith in God is what we live by and it is what will get us through”

For information on Ceme-tube, visit [www.cemetube.com](http://www.cemetube.com), call 715-377-2133, or visit Ceme-Tube at World of Concrete Booth Number S14504. ●

The 20,000 sq ft Ceme-tube warehouse is located at 2947 Harvey St in Hudson, WI



From his warehouse office in Hudson, WI, Jim Bradac discusses business matters, while 16-year old daughter Alicia tracks the number of times Ceme-tubes have been specified in architectural plans.

## Telescopes to Rockets Ceme-Tube 101

by Shelley Hawes

The possibilities seem endless. What began as making a solution to a building project, the requests for Ceme-Tubes are as diverse as the internet customers inquiring about them.

Orders for creative and resourceful uses frequently amaze the Bradac family. They've imagined so many ideas, grandma encouraged the children to start writing down their top 101 uses for the Ceme-Tube. Some of these uses include using the 30" dome lids as a saucer for sliding down snow covered hills, to leaving the end caps attached, cutting in half and using them as waste baskets.

Web browsers have found the site and ordered tubes for telescope building projects, sub-woofer enclosures, and science projects. A family in California purchased 2 to make a rocket for their son's bedroom. The head caterer for Disney World wanted many 30" tubes to be used as table bases. Even the medical community found a use for Ceme-Tube; The American Cancer Society is using them for new radiation experiments. ●