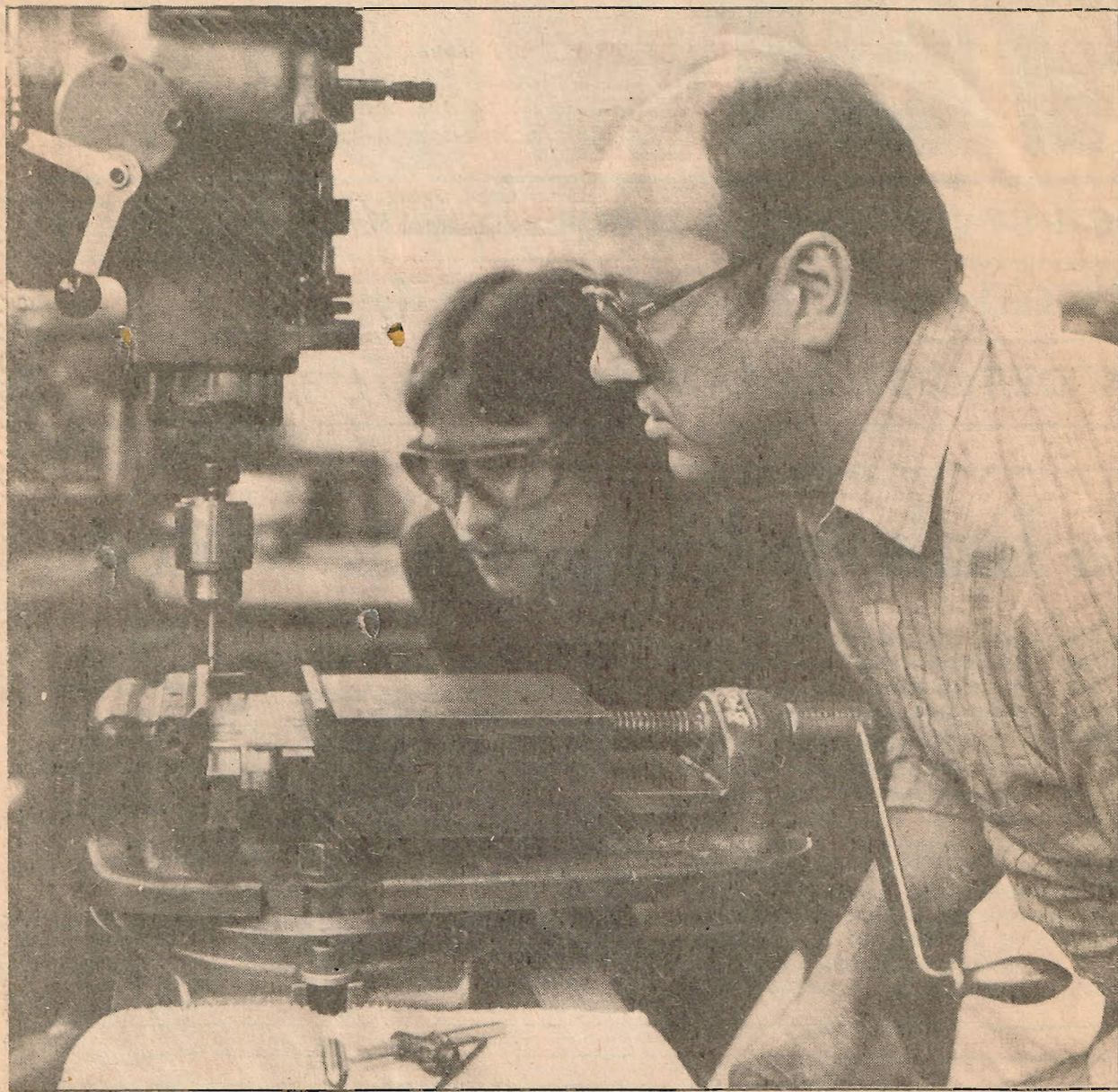


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Free Press Photo by AL KAMUDA

Gene Jamison, in foreground, and Scott Boswell check out the specifications on a job in progress at Jamison Industries.

Small products, big plans: Shop is a dream come true

By CHRISTOPHER HARTMAN
Free Press Special Writer

Ever since he was a boy, Gene Jamison has been an entrepreneur, dreaming of starting his own company.

At age 10 he was shining shoes in a barber shop, and he soon had more customers than he could handle. But whether he was shining shoes, cutting grass, shoveling snow or delivering on his paper route, he always worked hard.

"You can't just sit around and expect people to hand everything to you," he says.

At age 35, his goal was to start his own business by the time he was 40. As an apprentice and then a journeyman pattern maker in the automotive industry, he had studied and mastered his trade. But when the auto industry suffered severe setbacks, Jamison was laid off three times in 1978-81.

That convinced him the time was right to make his dream come true.

"The heck with depending on everybody else," he recalls saying when he decided to try and start his own business.

TODAY, HIS Southgate machine tool company, Jamison Industries, employs six people full time and three part time. The shop runs seven days a week, making prototypes and small parts that Jamison subcontracts from larger firms, he says.

Jamison, 39, of Brownstown Township, already is planning for his compa-

ny's expansion. One of his goals is to create jobs for handicapped workers as soon as he has repaid the bank loans he used to start his company and can move to a larger building.

"That's always been my goal, since I was a kid. Nobody in my family is handicapped; it's just something I decided to try for," he says. "My idea is to have 40 to 60 percent handicapped employes, but that's still a long way down the road."

JAMISON INDUSTRIES has come a long way from its start four years ago in the basement of his home. With a borrowed drill press and help from his friends, Jamison turned his ambition to have his own company into a small but increasingly successful business venture.

There have been a lot of tough times for him and his family since that first drill press in his basement, he says.

He remembers rising early and working late into the night and on weekends and holidays, often not seeing his sons for days at a time.

Jamison doesn't talk much about the difficulties, though. He talks mostly about the future and the promise it holds for the business and his family. He says he wants to set something up for his sons to have when they are older.

Jamison says he is proud of the fact that he has never missed a house payment and has maintained a good credit rating with Manufacturers Bank — even through the most difficult times.

"If we have to go without eating to pay the bills, we'll do it," he says.

Fortunately, it hasn't come to that, says his wife, Sharon. But it wasn't easy getting started.

"A year and a half ago, we were lucky we were surviving. We were living from month to month and really struggling," she says.

There were many times, she says, when she knew Gene would rather have been home with the family. Sometimes she and the boys would go to the shop to be with Gene while he was working.

"We've made it a family thing," she says.

GENE JAMISON has lived through threatening situations before.

The stocky ex-marine served at Da Nang, Vietnam, in 1965. Like many Vietnam veterans, he says he was proud to serve his country — but when he came home, he hung up his uniform in the closet and didn't tell anyone he had been there.

He still keeps a Marine Corps poster on his shop wall, though, for the rare times when he gets a little discouraged.

"I look at that poster to remind myself that things could be worse," he says.

Jamison is working out of the vacant Schaefer High School building in Southgate as part of the small business incubator program sponsored by the Downriver Community Conference. The program has not given Jamison Industries any direct financial aid, but has helped by making available a low-rent facility and supplying information on bidding and other essential services for a fledgling business.

STARTING OUT, Jamison says friends and neighbors helped him with everything from the loan of equipment to wiring his shop and helping him get customers. It has been a team effort all the way, he says.

Sharon Jamison handles the financial end of the business, and helped out in the shop when they began.

"She's not afraid to get her hands dirty," her husband says.

Now Jamison is poised to bring his company into the next phase of its development. He says he is looking for a long-term contract with an automaker or big manufacturing firm so he can plan his future and provide more security for employes. His plan is to break into the competitive parts production field, and he is looking for a chance to prove his reliability to a major company.

Does this mean the tough times are almost over?

"No, they've just begun," says Jamison, smiling.

"There's so much opportunity out there," he says. "I just want to prove to myself that I can succeed."