

10/17/04

Conemaugh Township juniors (from left) Wes Bowman, Jess Velmar and Jen Miller chat with Dan Perkins, president and CEO of MTS Technologies Inc.



JOHN RUCOSKY/
THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Success story

Businessman challenges students

By ED KANE
FOR THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Dan Perkins is challenging Johnstown area teenagers to expand their horizons by telling them his own tale.

Speaking to about 2,500 students in Johnstown-area high schools, Perkins is backing up his own success story with a powerful helping hand to bridge the gap between businesses and schools.

He hopes to get the entire community involved with his "challenge program," which offers students incentives for success.

He knows of what he speaks.

Perkins was a poor kid growing up in Prospect four decades ago, just hoping to get through high school and find a job anywhere.

He did that and more. Today Perkins heads MTS, a technology business that earns millions of dollars a year in revenue with 19 offices in nine states. His Johnstown office employs more than 40 professionals in the Crown American building downtown.

That's fitting, Perkins said, because he started the business in the Johnstown area before it expanded into Virginia and then across the country.

And he got his start shining shoes for customers of a Johnstown car wash.

As he shined shoes, he became curious about the car wash business, asking a lot of questions about the operation. At 16, he got a job there washing cars.

"Before long," he tells his school audiences, "I knew every element of that business. I knew as much as the foreman ... Eventually, I ran the car wash on weekends."

His drive and spirit didn't go unnoticed.

"One day," Perkins recalls, "the owner came over to me and asked, 'What do you want to do after you graduate from Pitt and you leave the Marine Corps?'"

Perkins had no plans to do either, but the owner "convinced me I had the ability to do both ... he became my inspiration. I did go to college and, in fact, I have triple majors and a master's degree. I also was a commissioned officer in the Marine Corps.

"The owner of the car wash served as the official who commissioned me ... and he pinned the bars on me that he wore when he was in Vietnam. Oh, the owner? You know him as Congressman John P. Murtha.

"The time I spent with Murtha broadened my experience base and opened my eyes to a greater horizon. Through that experience I learned to be a leader, a businessman and more. I learned that you are only limited by

your imagination and you can go as high as you set your goals.

"My experiences made me not want to settle for second best. It's important to have someone to motivate you ... But guess what? The motivation doesn't even have to come from someone else. It can come from you. You can provide your own motivation."

That is his message for the youth of today. Students in Greater Johnstown, Westmont Hilltop, Ferndale Area, Richland, Conemaugh Township, Conemaugh Valley and Forest Hills high schools have either heard the message or will hear it this month.

Perkins started his project with a pilot program at Bishop McCort High School, rewarding students with cash for attendance, top academics and improvement in class work, and with the student networking program at the Showcase for Commerce in June.

At the schools, principals and guidance counselors establish what type of behavior will be rewarded with money. The program also establishes a business ambassador network to work with each school.

For example, David Fyock, CEO of MountainTop Technologies has "adopted" Forest Hills High School for his company to work with. Students there will be

offered internships at MountainTop, giving them experience and the company potential employees.

Perkins believes that if his project is carried to the fullest it will help reverse the "brain drain" trend of youths leaving Cambria and Somerset counties for better job markets.

He hopes that the business ambassadors, working with students and school officials, can formally launch the program in January. He also plans to work with local colleges to obtain scholarships as rewards, and is planning a fund drive to make it all happen.

Just what motivates Perkins to take the time to organize his Challenge Program?

"A love of Johnstown," he was quick to say.

"I not only started here. I came back here. I remember a downtown of years ago ... Woolworth's, McCrory's, the White House, the department stores, the theaters.

"Now we can't bring all of that back, but we can build a new downtown. In fact, a new Johnstown. I brought my company here; we can bring other technical companies here. And it all starts at the beginning, with the kids.

"Challenge them to learn and they also will learn to love the community ... and they will be here when we need them. I was."

More state, region news/A5, A6
■ Cell phones disrupt Philadelphia fire radios/A5
■ Many angling for share of slot-machine profits/A6