

Success Is A Journey

How One Job Shop Owner Learned to Enjoy the Trip Instead of Worrying about the Destination.

story and photos by C. H. Bush, editor



CNC lathe operator Carlos Sandoval sets up the Ganesh Cyclone-32 CS 7-axis twin-spindle CNC turn-mill center with 11 live tools and 27 total tools. The Ganesh is the workhorse for Heather, bringing in business from other shops without multi-axis capability

Chino, CA's Heather Screw Products Co., Inc. was founded in 1954 by Elmer and William Heather, grandfather and father respectively of Steve Heather, the company's present owner-president. Like most shops, the company started small, grew and had some success. But also like most shops, the company had its ups and downs, too.

"My grandfather and father were both working in machine shops back then," Heather says. "I'm not sure what prompted them to do it, but they decided to go together and start their own business. They were both highly skilled cam screw machine operators and programmers, and somehow they managed to get a fifty-thousand part order from a lighting manufacturer. Back then that was a big order so they scrambled to get set up and fill it."

The scrambling meant the two Heathers had to find a machine to make the parts and a place to put it. "They bought an old clunker Brown & Sharpe, and had to fix it to get it running," Heather says. "Then they rented a back corner in the shop where my dad was working. Unfortunately, the guy who owned the space apparently wanted to see them fail, but when they didn't, he told them they had to leave."

The Heathers rented a small building in Paramount, CA and moved out.

"It was a small building," Heather says, "but it was kind of ideal for them because, although it was small, it was on a big piece of land. The owner told them he would add on to the building if they needed more space. So, that's what happened. They grew and the landlord added a lot more square footage. They stayed there here until 1969 and then moved to Buena Park, CA."



A variety of parts produced by 57-year-old Heather Screw Products Company, Inc.

Rocky Road

Two years later, Heather's grandfather passed away.

"That left it to my dad to run the business," he says.

“For a number of years things went very well for him, but in the early ‘80s, things slowed down and business dropped off. In fact, it got bad enough that he seriously thought about selling the business. I was about fourteen at the time. Dad listed the business with a broker, and that guy came in with a really low-ball offer. That left my dad facing a tough decision. Take the offer, which was embarrassingly low, or keep struggling to keep the business alive.”

Which is where young Steve Heather entered the picture.

“I was in junior high at the time,” Heather says. “I could tell my dad was really worried, almost depressed. So, one day, when I got home from school, I called him and talked to him about it. He said he had until the end of the day to let the broker know if he was interested. He said, ‘I don’t want to give it away, but I don’t know what to do.’ I said, Dad, if you’re not happy with the offer, don’t take it.’ I told him, ‘I’ll help you at the shop, if you need help.’ So, he said, ‘Maybe I won’t take the offer then.’ And he didn’t. I don’t know if my offer to help had any effect on his decision, but I like to think it did.”



Steve Heather, L., and CNC mill setup machinist Gene Spielman discuss tolerance and QC requirements needed on a part. In the background is a Scherr Tumico optical comparator.

Father and Son

The young Heather began working with his dad after school.

“When school was over, I worked with him the whole summer,” he says. “After that, I started working every day after school and on weekends. I did that until I graduated, and then started working full time. He taught me everything I needed to eventually run the business. Initially, I worked on second op stuff, drill presses, lathes, tapping, that kind of thing. Then, after a while, when he’d get busy on the screw machines, he’d need me there, so, I ended up learning to program the cam machines and fix them when they broke down. The funny thing is, I suddenly realized that I really liked the business. I thought, ‘Hey, this can be a pretty good challenging career.’ I was actually happy working with dad.”



The Ganesh Cyclone GT-32 is a 3-axis 1.25" (32mm) bar diameter gang-tooled CNC screw machine. The gang tool slide allows great flexibility in tool placement. Dual insert boring bars provide two tools in one tool shank. A bank of 4-driven tools can be mounted on the cross slide to work in conjunction with the full C-axis spindle to complete the milling and drilling features on the workpiece. An 8-station tool turret can also be added to the cross slide for additional tooling.

Major Moves

Heather Screw Products made some major moves over the next couple of years.

"For one thing, I had been going to a community college at night taking classes in CNC programming," Heather says. "I figured that, if I was going to stay with the business, I wanted to do more than what we were doing with just cam-driven screw machines. So, in 1989 we bought our first CNC Machine, a Femco lathe. Dad was a great screw machine machinist, but he wasn't too interested in CNC. He basically left the CNC stuff to me, which was fine. I loved it."

In 1991 the Heathers left Buena Park and moved to a 4,800-sq-ft location about a mile from their current location in Chino, CA,

"After we moved to Chino, we kept getting jobs to quote that were good lathe jobs for the CNC, but they also had mill work to do on them. We didn't have a CNC mill at that time, so I said, 'Dad, if we had a CNC mill to go with the lathe, we could get a lot more work. He finally agreed, and we bought our first CNC mill, a Fadal."

In 1997 Heather's father passed away, leaving the business to him just as his father had done.

"Actually, dad had turned over most of the business management to me by 1995," Heather says, "so I was ready by then to handle it without help. And, of course, my wife, Tina, was working with me to handle billing, accounting and other paperwork. My mom comes in to the office three days a week to help, too. They've both been a tremendous help."



Line up of machines at Heather Screw Products. in the foreground is the Ganesh Cyclone 32, with live tooling and bar feeder. In the background are three Femco Durga 25E lathes. CNC lathe operator is Rafael Vargas.

Final Big Moves

In 2002 Heather bought an 8,000-sq-ft building in Chino, and made the move.

“By then we had a Brother TC-S28-O drill-tap machine, a Hwacheon High Echo 31A CNC lathe, three Femco Durga turning centers, and six Fadal mills,” he says. “Also, we were getting a lot of jobs that had both milling and turning, and we needed a way to complete parts in one setup. So, in 2008, I took a couple of parts with me and went to Westec looking for a machine with those capabilities. The main thing was I needed a high-quality, precision machine, but I also needed something that wouldn’t break my budget. That’s when I settled on the Ganesh Cyclone 32.”

One of the parts Heather took to Westec required 4 setups to complete.

“We were turning the part, and then putting it in a 4-axis mill, doing the mill work on it, then take it back to the lathe and machine the excess material off it, and then we’d go to an additional op to finish the a hole on the part. The Ganesh now does that part in one setup. Total cycle time is about the same, but the big savings came from the reduced setups and handling, and the fact that it freed our employees to do other things. The machine holds tenths consistently, even after three years of heavy operation.”

Both Heather and his setup man visited Ganesh in Chatsworth, CA to learn to use the multi-axis machine.

“The multi-axis machine is different,” he says, “but it was easy to learn. That machine brought in quite a bit of new business too, especially from other shops who don’t have the multi-axis capability.”

Success?

Today, Heather Screw Products serves a wide number of industries, including the motorcycle aftermarket, aerospace, firearms, and other machine shops. The company employs 6 people in the shop, plus Heather, his wife and his mother.

“People ask me when I will consider that I’ve finally made a success of this business,” he says. “When I hear that, I point to a sign I have on my wall. That sign says ‘Success is a journey, not a destination.’ I believe that. As far as I’m concerned, I’m a super success. During my journey in this business, I’ve gained some great customers, fine employees, a wonderful family and lots of good friends. It can’t get better than that.”