

A man with short brown hair and safety glasses, wearing a light blue and white striped button-down shirt and dark trousers with a brown belt, stands in a large industrial factory. He is smiling and has his right hand resting on a large, curved, rusted metal component. The background shows the interior of a factory with high ceilings, steel beams, and various pieces of machinery and equipment.

Making Machines Work

From Pepsi to the
Department of Defense,
Lindsey Crisp '94 and
Carver Machine Works
keep industries going



Next time you pop open a can of Pepsi, take a look at the ingredients. Do you notice something called “phosphoric acid” listed? Have you ever wondered where it came from and what it is doing in your drink? The simple answer of why it is in your cola is that phosphoric acid offsets sugar to provide a tangy flavor. The complex answer of where it comes from, well, that’s where **Lindsey Crisp ’94**, president and CEO of Carver Machine Works in Washington, NC, and his 67 employees come in to play. Crisp leads a team of skilled engineers, machinists, and welders that fabricate specialty materials used in the machines that keep industries going, including mining phosphate ore that is refined into phosphoric acid for your carbonated beverage enjoyment.

Crisp grew up in Greenville, NC and knew at a young age that he wanted to attend East Carolina. He is a lifelong Pirates fan and couldn’t see himself going anywhere else. Crisp refers to himself as a “typical eastern North Carolina guy” who loved being outside, going camping, and being on the river. He was active in scouting and earned the rank of Eagle Scout. His dad owns a small business Exsel Industries in town and his mom was a teacher who received her master’s from ECU. “We’re all big ECU fans,” said Crisp, “including my wife Marybeth ’96, who got her master’s from ECU, and my children Allen and Libby.”

When he was a student at ECU, Crisp took on a rigorous accounting curriculum and was very active in the College of Business. He also spent a lot of time outside of the classroom getting experience in the business world and earning his spending money. “I was fortunate that my parents were able to put me through school, but any extracurricular activities that I wanted to do I had to pay for myself. I worked a couple of different jobs while in college—for a CPA, at a bank, for a collections agency, S&K Menswear in the mall. You know, I was trying to get a business degree so I thought it was important to get relevant business experience. The time I spent with Online Information Services (the collections agency) was probably some of the best experience in learning how to communicate with people; those jobs were important. As I look back on college I was either in class, working, or hanging out with friends and attending athletics events.”

Since Crisp grew up around a small business, he was comfortable working in that type of environment and appreciated what small businesses had to offer their employees, their customers, and the community. “It was my comfort zone. It was important for me to work somewhere that I felt I could make an impact and wouldn’t get lost.” As it turned out, Crisp was working for Online Information Services when he graduated and was lucky enough to be offered a position as an accountant. “I graduated on Friday and started my new job on Monday.” During Crisp’s first few years as a full-time employee, the owner of the company Jim Blair, who had become a mentor for Crisp, was working to expand the business through opening small finance establishments. By age 27 Crisp was chief financial officer of Check Cashing Headquarters and helped open 50 of its stores in the southeastern United States. “So much of life is timing and I got in with Online on the ground floor. I was working for someone who had known me for a long time, had a lot of faith in me, and gave me opportunities.”

After six years and lots of growth, Crisp decided it was

time to return to a truly small business and took a position as a CPA with local accounting firm Parrott and Douglas. The firm merged with Dixon Odom, then with Dixon Hughes. Shortly after Crisp had been promoted to senior manager, his old friend and mentor Jim Blair called to tell him about a job opening at Carver Machine Works in little Washington. "Carver is an employee-owned company, so it's always had a board of directors. Jim was on the board and had been for years when the president and CEO position came open and he wanted to put my name on the list of candidates. I told him that I appreciated the offer, but I was set working with Dixon Hughes and just wasn't interested. He said, 'Hear me out,' and proceeded to tell me about the company. I really heard his passion for what he thought the opportunity was with Carver and I caught it. So I interviewed and here I am. It was one of those things that I would always wonder 'what if,' so I had to try it. That's how a guy like me gets to be president and CEO of a company."

Since Crisp took Carver's helm, the company has seen significant improvements. What started as a family owned and operated general machine shop has grown to 67 employees that own the company through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) and fabricate specialty materials for various industries, including aerospace and defense, pulp and paper, and nuclear and chemical. Carver

keeps big, industrial machines running by making and/or refurbishing the parts that make those machines operate, parts like industrial pumps and centrifuges. In essence, Carver helps keep industries operating. "One minute we might be manufacturing a new scrubber for PCS Phosphate in Aurora or fabricating tanks to transport nuclear waste across the country, and the next working on a new defense system that will be deployed to keep our nation safe," said Crisp. "Our philosophy has become, 'if engineers can dream it up and design it, Carver can make it.'"

Carver's work with the Department of Defense is fairly new, but constitutes approximately 25% of the company's work. "The thing with Defense is that they can come in at any time that we're working on something for them and stop production on everything else until their piece is completed. It's serious business. This relationship came at a time when our work with pulp and paper was decreasing because that industry has suffered over the last few years. It's been a big learning curve, but if we hadn't taken it on when we did, we'd be a shell of ourselves today. We would have lost a lot of the people that we've worked so hard to get and develop over the years. We're so fortunate to have secured that business."

In 2009 Carver opened a new 50,000 square-foot building at their facility that can accommodate extremely large jobs using massive overhead cranes and high-tech machinery. "Anything that can be transported down the highway can be built, repaired, or fabricated in this building. We're set apart from our competitors because of those capabilities." Some of Carver's clients include Domtar, Weyerhaeuser, International Paper, Northrop Grumman, Westinghouse, Honeywell, GE, and military bases.

Despite the high-profile work that Carver does, it's the small business atmosphere and the people that Crisp appreciates most. "What's significant about Carver being employee-owned



A Carver machinist working on fabrication.

is that workers have equity in the company. They get more than just a paycheck because they are invested in the company and our success. It's more of a long-term approach on how to run a company. When you look at the tenure of our skilled people, whether it's our engineers, our welders, or even some of our most skilled machinists, it's incredible the number of years they have spent here. The fact that we're employee-owned, it doesn't just mean something to a stockholder or to me when we do something good—it means something to everybody here. My favorite thing about my job is interacting with our customers and especially our employees."

When Crisp is not working, he helps coach his son's basketball team, serves on the Beaufort County Committee of 100, is part of North Carolina's Aerospace Alliance, and is a member of ECU's Engineering Advisory Board. "We try to hire ECU graduates whenever we can. Right now we have two employees from the College of Business, one from hospitality management, one from engineering, and one from industrial technology. It's a huge deal that ECU has such a terrific engineering program right here in eastern North Carolina and I love being a part of that." **EC**



Crisp and one of his employees examine a part for the Department of Defense.