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By Tony Pierro, The State Journal

POCA —Clark Truck Parts Vice President Eric Clark knew he could sell his trucks in a global market —he'd been doing it for years.

Going to China with Sen. Jay Rockefeller's D-W.Va., Project Harvest '99 Trade Mission in January was still taking a bit of a chance, however. Now, it looks like that chance could pay off.

Clark Truck Parts was started by Eric Clark's father, Jack Clark, 37 years ago with \$3,000 worth of parts in the back of a truck. Today the business remanufactures U.S. Military 6 x 6 all-wheel drive trucks as well as parts for those trucks. Eric Clark said his family is aware of how much Jack Clark has achieved in creating and building the business. Clark Truck Parts Vice President Eric Clark talks with U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller about how participating in a trade mission to China has helped his Poca company achieve international success.



"We take real pride in what he's done," Clark said of his father.

Clark said his presence on the trip to China came about after he visited Charles Ryan Associates, an advertising, public relations and marketing firm in Charleston.

"I said, 'I want some assistance in marketing our trucks,'" Clark said. "They kept telling me, 'Let's go to see Sen. Rockefeller. Let's go to China.' So we started calling Sen. Rockefeller's office and we went to China. We're making the investment, but we're trying to make something happen," Clark said.

Clark said the trip to China is already showing some returns. He said the company is working on a potential sale of 80 to 100 trucks there. The trucks would be modified to carry water for use in fighting fires. They are needed because China lacks the infrastructure for a system of fire hydrants to supply water to fire fighters.

"They are talking about 80 to 100 trucks for one city, for one fire department agency," Clark said. "That would be a great step because once the trucks are in the city, we could start selling trucks for other uses."

Clark gave a lot of credit for the relationships he has so quickly established in China to Chuan Liu Ni, who works with the Center for Chinese Studies at West Virginia University. Ni's contacts in China provided Clark with the openings he needed to begin building those relationships, he said.

"The senator (Rockefeller) with Chuan Liu was able to make connections for all types of people to go over there in any types of business," Clark said. "I was concerned that we, being not high-tech, but more traditional manufacturing, wouldn't have as much leverage as, say, a computer store or somebody who's doing more of a high-tech industry."

Because of Rockefeller's and Ni's connections however, Clark said his concern proved unfounded. "I had people that came back two or three times to see me while I was there," he said. "They would bring other people back, so I could have spent another two weeks and still had two or three meetings every day."

Clark said if the order for the fire trucks comes through, he will need to hire more people. His operation currently has 16 employees, he said.

"If we get the order, we're looking at an additional six to 10 people to fill the order," he said.

Clark said his long-term goal is to form a partnership with somebody who would set up a facility in China that would be similar to the one Clark has in Poca.

Clark Truck Parts would then purchase the trucks for sale to that facility, which would make any modifications and resell the trucks in China.

"If I can sell trucks like that, directly what I'm buying, over there, if they had a shop like this and they fix them up, long-term that's what we want to do," Clark said. "Kind of like set up another hub for what we do here. Form a joint venture, for lack of a better term, but form a joint venture where they're doing over there what we're doing here."

Clark Truck Parts already has been involved in the global market, selling trucks in several other countries.

"We sell globally," Clark said. "I just delivered a truck to Costa Rica. I've got trucks in Argentina, Chile, Kenya, Australia."

However, Clark said this is the first time the company has taken the initiative internationally.

Rockefeller said Clark took a risk in going to China, but the risk is paying off.

He said the success of smaller companies, like Clark Truck Parts, is vital to the economic well-being of West Virginia.

"I'm so glad that he went. I'm so glad that he is a classic West Virginia entrepreneur, nurtured by his father, who started all of this, Jack Clark. And also, for my part, I'm going to work as hard to make this small business work as I did to make Toyota work,"

Rockefeller said.

"Every job here is another family that has food on the table," he said.

Rockefeller said it is important for other West Virginia companies to do what Clark Truck Parts did. There is a lot of opportunity out there, he said.