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***JACKS OF ALL TRADES, MASTERS OF FIBERGLASS***

## E&J Painting & Fiberglass

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# JACKS OF ALL TRADES, MASTERS OF FIBERGLASS: E&J Painting & Fiberglass

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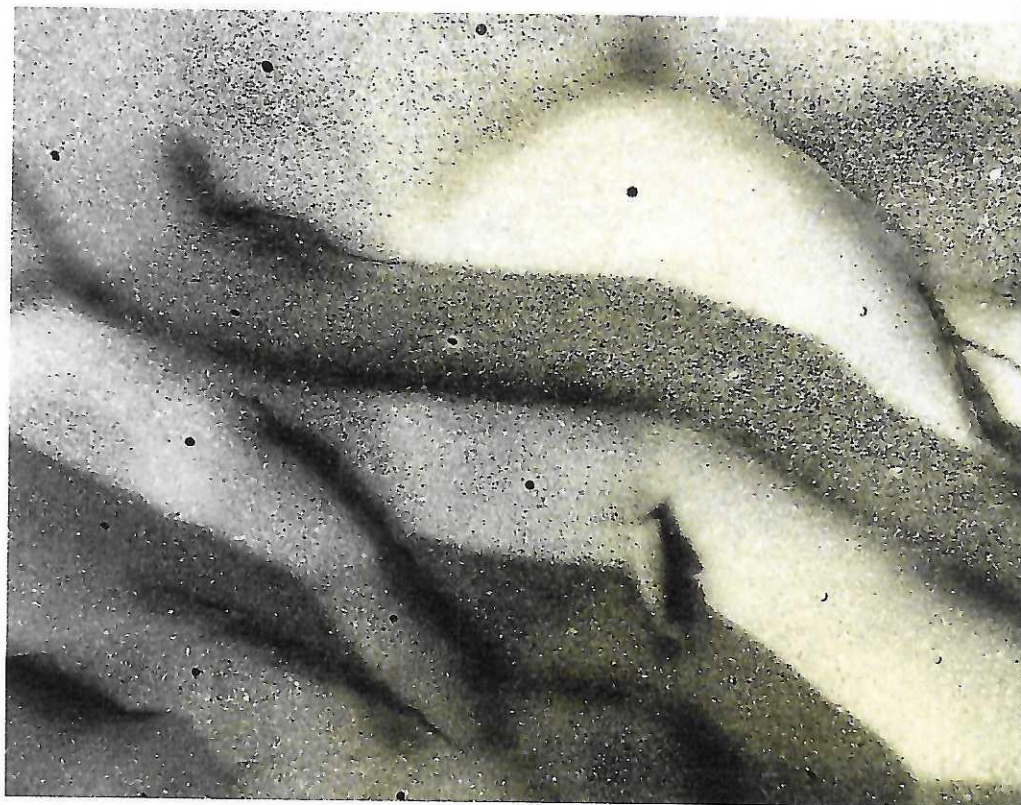


"I've always kind of looked at clients as a stock portfolio. You don't want to get too deep into different sectors because you always have your ups and downs."

What do vending machines, climbing walls, medical trucks, RV campers, police helmets and the Kennedy Space Center all have in common? They all have fiberglass. More specifically, they all have fiberglass that was created by E&J Painting & Fiberglass.

Kirk Ellis is the current CEO and owner of E&J Painting & Fiberglass, a Denver-based job shop that creates fiberglass products for a dizzying number of applications and customers. The company was founded by Ellis' father in April 1981. Ellis' father had been involved in the fiberglass business long before he started E&J, having previously worked for Schneider Fiberglass in Nebraska, building molds for concrete. While with Schneider, he came to Denver to begin building offshore living quarters for oil rigs; the modules were built in Denver, then shipped to Texas, then assembled in places all over the world. Tired of traveling, Ellis' father founded E&J in Denver, starting out initially by constructing cherry picker baskets for Mobile Tool International, which was later bought out by Altech Industries. From there, E&J continued to expand and diversify its set of clients. Ellis joined the business, working for his father, in 1988 after he finished college, and took over as owner in 2003.

Ellis' philosophy for business is one of diversification, that the more sectors of business E&J is involved in, the better it is for the company: "We pick and choose our clients. The first thing is, 'Can we meet their demand?' ... But then when we choose the customer, we really want to have a long-term relationship with them. We want to be, not a part of their company, but we want to be a key supplier for them. So we do transportation, we do a little bit in the RV industry, and we have stuff in the play industry. ... [The play industry is] slow right now, but because we're busy in other sectors, it doesn't hurt us as bad. It kind of keeps us floating."



For a job shop that specializes only in a certain business or even a single sector of the economy, a sharp turn in production can be a death knell. Ellis' strategy proved especially prescient in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic created a particularly unusual style of recession and rebound, characterized by many economists as "K-shaped." As many people have noticed, the GDP of the United States as a whole has been more or less unphased by the pandemic after the initial shock, even though some businesses and sectors still find themselves in a tailspin and others find themselves flourishing and experiencing runaway growth.

For E&J, that diversification of clients means that even though they've lost some work in the last year as some clients cut back production, others were ramping up. "We didn't do a lot of stuff in the play industry last year because everybody's home," Ellis said. "But we were considered essential because we have a couple of companies that are. We build police helmet shells, which was considered essential. Then, once the pandemic

[was slowing], RVs were really, really big. Everybody wanted to get out of their house and go camping someplace. So we were really busy from about May until the end of this year building RV parts. So yeah, [the pandemic] did affect us from January until April, and then we started seeing the turnaround from May on."

Although Ellis believes in client diversification and not delving too deep into any one industry sector, E&J's relationship with clients is anything but surface-level. E&J "want[s] to have a long-term relationship with them," as Ellis said, and that's exactly what they work hard to foster. Watermill Express is currently E&J's longest-served client, having been with the company since before Ellis joined the company, or "as long as I can remember," as he put it, "at least since 1988." Initially, E&J built water vending machines for Watermill, ultimately building well over 1,800 units for them. Although the amount of work they do for Watermill is less than they've done in the past, a result of Watermill's switch to concrete units, the relationship is still strong. E&J continues to build casing



shrouds for the units and branding elements, an arch, similar to McDonald's or Nike's logos, that still remains on top of the vending unit.

E&J also has numerous clients in sectors like recreation and transportation. In recreation, one large, notable client that E&J works with is Eldorado Climbing, for whom they manufacture modular climbing walls. "Basically, we do a lot of different types of shapes that are 4 foot by 4 foot," Ellis said. These modular shapes then combine, allowing consumers to create custom rock climbing walls to suit whatever space they need them in, whether that's for a private house or a commercial gym. E&J also builds larger, 4-by-7-foot round modulars that can be stacked to create freestanding climbing towers instead of walls. "The highest ones we've done were about 45 feet tall," Ellis said.



In the transportation sector, E&J has worked closely with Summit Body Works, a commercial truck manufacturer that makes everything from mobile classrooms to bloodmobiles to emergency response vehicles. "We've been with them seven or eight years," Ellis said. "What we've been building for them is a nose cone that goes on top of their Freightliner trucks." In addition to the nose cones, E&J is currently expanding the amount of work they do with Summit Body Works. Just recently, within the past year, E&J built a brand-new, all-fiberglass body, prototype truck for them, a 38-foot for the medical field. "So we made the walls, the roof and all the components that go underneath the decking of the floor," Ellis said. "It's kind of like a Winnebago bus, but it's on a Freightliner chassis." Ellis expects to make more of the prototypes in the near future, and Summit Body Works gives them frequent standalone projects as well. "They design a new truck, and then we'll make fiberglass parts that'll be specifically for that truck."

Providing so much for so many different types of clients requires a close relationship with a supplier, which is exactly what NAC provides for E&J, having been a supplier since 1996. Lance Tueller is an account manager at NAC, which is responsible for providing the resins and gel coats that E&J uses to create its products.

Tueller works closely with E&J, ensuring they have the best supplies needed for their projects. Tueller mentioned one project in particular from the past year that had caught his imagination and that he was especially proud of having helped E&J bring to fruition: "It was a model of the solar system for the Space Center. I don't remember exactly how big, but it was really big. That one was really cool." The project, as an installation in a federal education facility, required fire retardant gel coats. Since it formed a departure from E&J's usual project requirements, NAC and Tueller were especially involved to provide the right materials.

"Oh, yeah, so that's a company that's called Playtime," Ellis said, when I brought up the solar system project with him. "With them since 2005, we've built play projects. They used to do a lot of stuff that would go in the indoor malls." Over the summer, though, E&J did the fiberglass work for a massive installation at the Kennedy Space Center on Merritt Island, Florida. "It was a very large project," Ellis said. "We didn't do all the planets, but we did the sun, Mercury, Mars. We didn't do Venus or Earth because they didn't have enough room, but I think we did almost everything else. The sun was huge. All these pieces were huge. We're talking 20-foot-diameter spheres."

It was an uncommon project for E&J, given the size, requirements and one-off nature, one that couldn't have been accomplished without NAC's assistance.

But still, in a way, uncommonness in projects is a little bit of E&J's specialty. With so many different clients working in so many different fields, they have to be spry, always on their toes and ready to adapt to whatever project a client is bringing to them. It's their greatest strength as a long-lasting business, "keep[ing] us floating," as Ellis said — and it's also the best provision they can offer their clients, that they aren't locked into doing one thing, that they can get the job done when it comes to the new truck prototype or the giant solar system model.

What's next for E&J? It seems they'll keep diversifying, both with old and new customers. There are new trucks and prototypes that Summit Body Works needs parts for, and Ellis intends to ramp up production in the RV camper department with a company called High Altitude. As the pandemic subsides, he says he's "bullish" for 2021. "We're going to be pretty busy," he said. It looks like his bet on diversifying has paid off, and certainly means that E&J will be busy in a lot of different places.

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