



Ryan Industries, based in Wixom, MI, received the 2011 Diversity Supplier Development Supplier of the Year Award from Chrysler. From left to right, Sig Huber, director of Chrysler supplier relations; Gianni Coda, former head of Fiat purchasing; Mike Ryan, V-P of Sales at Ryan Industries; Brenda Ryan, owner Ryan Industries; and the late Chrysler executive, Dan Knott.

Using an Engineering Degree as a Springboard

This is the story of how Brenda Ryan built two award-winning supplier businesses

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Detroit native Brenda Ryan demonstrates how flexible an engineering degree can be—and the varied types of careers available in manufacturing.



Brenda Ryan

Today, Ryan owns and operates two thriving, award-winning manufacturing and distribution operations in two different states.

Ryan Industries, launched in 1995 and based in Wixom, MI, handles warehousing, packaging, light assembly and

distribution for domestic and foreign manufacturers. One of her major clients is Chrysler, which has honored Ryan's business as the 2011 Diversity Supplier Development Supplier of the Year. In May of 2013, Brenda was honored to receive



Brenda Ryan receives the 2011 Diversity Supplier Development Supplier of the Year Award from Chrysler at the Fox Theater in Detroit. Ryan Industries provides warehousing, distribution, kitting and light assembly operations for a variety of customers within and outside the automotive industry. The company is a certified Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) with the Michigan Minority Supplier Development Council (MMSDC) and a certified Women Business Enterprise (WBE) with the Women's Business Enterprise National Council.

Chrysler's 2012 Success Story Award at the National Minority Supplier Development Council's Minority Business Leadership Awards ceremony held in New York.

Meanwhile, Alliance Industries, based in Springfield, MO, is a remanufacturer of Original Equipment Manufacturers'

torque converters and transfer cases. Ryan became a partner in that business in 2000 and a full owner five years later. The company has shipped hundreds of thousands of converters on various product lines over the years.

But if you ask Ryan, her thriving career happened somewhat by chance.

When she was in junior high school, the 9th-grade students were asked to pick a career path. A variety of professionals came in to talk to the students about their choices, including an engineer. He didn't say anything particularly profound that day, Ryan recalled, but his work sounded interesting to a girl who excelled in math and science.

"I just thought: That's what I want to do."

And so Ryan did.

After graduating from Cass Tech in 1972, she went on to Michigan Technological University, where she chose metallurgical engineering as her major. She was one of two women in the program at the time.

"I had no clue what it was about," Ryan jokes now. "It kind of snowballed into other opportunities."

Those opportunities came in the way of internships that exposed her to a variety of engineering work in corporate America. She worked at General Motors' metallurgy lab over two summers and at General Electric's Carboloy Division. She found the work interesting and challenging and loved the logical thought process.

After graduation in 1976, she worked in GM's Central Foundry Division in Saginaw. She was a foreman and general foreman in the malleable iron foundry. It was tough work.

"But I'm tough," said Ryan, who was born and raised in Detroit and walks around her facilities with an athletic command. "I enjoyed my job there. I like the factory environment."

She worked there for 11 years, and thought she would be a GM lifer, but fate had other plans.

Eventually, she was approached by a department head at Central Foundry about pursuing a master's degree in materials engineering at the University of Virginia.

"I thought it was time to try something new," Ryan said.

So she sold her house, took a leave of absence and went to Virginia, where she would finish her master's degree in 20 months.

Some former GM colleagues had taken jobs at the old Kelsey-Hayes Co. (now Hayes Lemmerz) and recruited her to a principal engineer position there, where she worked in the aluminum wheel group.

Brenda Ryan

President/Owner—Ryan Industries Inc., Wixom, MI

- Business launched in 1995
- Packaging, Warehousing, Distribution and Light Assembly
- Certified Minority (MBE) and Women (WBE) Business Enterprise

President/Owner—Alliance Industries LLC, Springfield, MO

- Business launched in 2000
- Remanufacture Powertrain components for the automotive industry
- Certified Minority (MBE) and Women (WBE) Business Enterprise

President/Owner, Ryan Properties LLC

Educational Summary

- B.S. Metallurgical Engineering - Michigan Technological University (MTU)
- M.S. Materials Science Engineering - University of Virginia

Affiliations & Appointments

- Board of Control—MTU (Gubernatorial appointment, served 10 years)
- Presidential Council of Alumnae—MTU
- Materials Science Engineering External Advisory Board-MTU
- Academy of Materials Science and Engineering-MTU-Inducted 2008

“That was a job I absolutely loved,” she said. “I was on the Chrysler account. I had to work with design engineers, engineers, test labs, purchasing ... That taught me how to work on commercial issues, it taught me how to negotiate.”

That’s also when Ryan started seeing some opportunities to start her own business.

Launching a New Business

After six years, she said, “It was time for me to take control of my destiny.”

By then, in her early 40s, she knew a few important people at Chrysler and thought she would just break into a little known part of the supplier sector—the service industry, where suppliers get a contract to provide the service parts on a vehicle line for years after the vehicle stops production.

“The new business didn’t come as quickly as I thought,” Ryan said. “We picked up some little jobs. Not all of the jobs were cherry, but you take them to show that you can do more. There’s usually something you can learn from it.”

She launched Ryan Industries with her savings, a loan and two employees. Within a few years, however, she was running out of space in her initial location in Detroit. A resident of Commerce Township, Ryan recalled sleeping in her office some nights before deciding to relocate to Wixom.

Ryan bought her first building, with 48,000 square feet, in Wixom in 1996. She built a second 34,000 square foot building in 2001.

Today, one of Ryan’s current service contracts with Chrysler is for all their seating in existing and prior models. They store the inventory from suppliers such as JCI and Lear and then ship it to dealers after receiving electronic orders.

Her business, initially as a Tier Two supplier, has been a Tier One since the second year of operation.

But that’s not all Ryan Industries does. It contracts to store and ships inventory for a variety of other manufacturing customers, too. Her team of 10 employees handles a variety of light assembly, such as assembling differential pressure sensors, which are shipped to Saltillo, Mexico, for final assembly on Chrysler vehicles, or assembling tire pressure monitoring systems, which went into several Ford Motor cars. In addition, Ryan also packages and distributes transmission repair kits, experiencing a 500% increase in sales during the first 18 months of production.

Expanding into Remanufacturing

In 2000, Ryan teamed up with James Wehr, former president and owner of Aaron’s Automotive Products in the Alliance remanufacturing operation in Springfield, MO.

“There was a good employment pool there,” Ryan explained.

She bought the business outright in 2005, even though that means frequent plane rides and trips away from her husband, Mike, who is the company’s vice president of sales, and her dogs, Bogey and Bailey. She usually makes it home in time for weekend rounds of golf.

By 2008, Alliance had become the sole source for Chrysler’s service torque converter program. Two years ago, they also added transfer cases.

“We built that line from scratch for Chrysler,” Ryan said proudly.



Ryan built this additional 34,000 square foot building in Wixom in 2001 to accommodate growth in its warehousing, distribution, kitting and light assembly operations.

In May, Ryan was named “Small Business Owner of the Year” during Springfield’s Third Annual Minorities in Business Heritage Awards ceremony.

Alliance currently employs 18 workers and Ryan is proud of how lean the operation runs. Her experience in the auto industry has taught her that she needs to run lean to deal with the inevitable downturns. During the most recent one, for example, she said her company fared just fine.

“We did well, but you never feel completely secure in automotive. You can never really breathe easy,” she said. “That’s why we’re small and flexible. We don’t have a lot of bureaucracy. You can’t ever sit back and rest on your laurels.”

What’s Next?

As Ryan reflected on her long, varied career and how far it has taken her from her beginnings in Detroit, she said it’s been a wonderful ride.

“You never forget where you came from. That’s what keeps you grounded,” she said. “I really feel like I’ve come a long way.”

She said she’s especially proud of how much she has learned over the years, noting how much she has loved so

many of her adventures, with running her own companies being the most challenging.

“You feel such a responsibility to your employees,” she said. “It’s so much different than being an employee. It gives you a whole different perspective on how things should run, a global perspective.

As for her business, Ryan sees more growth in the future.

“We know what our core competencies are,” Ryan said.

For her companies, that includes contract warehousing, packaging, light assembly, remanufacturing, and distribution.

She also said the business has a lot of opportunity with growth with foreign manufacturers. “They need somewhere they can ship into, for subsequent delivery to OEM manufacturing facilities,” Ryan explained.

Ryan said none of her successes would have been possible without the foundation provided by her engineering degrees.

“Engineering is a thought process,” she said. “It’s a good foundation for so many other things.” **ME**

Ryan Industries' Customers

- Chrysler Group, LLC/Mopar
- Ford Motor Company
- Lear Corporation
- Alliance Industries
- UBE Automotive North America
- Andersen & Associates
- Applied Instruments
- D & D Performance
- Marketing Displays International
- Lizhong Automotive, NA
- Carl R. Sams Photography
- Case New Holland
- CAT Reman