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NORTH COUNTY BUSINESS

In full swing

Oceanside company uses recycled plastic to build playgrounds

By Nicole Reino

OCEANSIDE — How many milk cartons does it take to make a playground?
“On average, 10,000 to 20,000,” John Ogden replied with a childish grin on his face.

But Ogden, president of Progressive Design Playgrounds in Oceanside, wasn't smiling just because he knew that bit of trivia. He's happy. This has been a good year for him and his wife, Margaret Ryan.

In January, the same month the couple adopted their 11-month-old daughter, they bought a \$3.5 million playground business, and Ogden said it is thriving.

The company, which has 14 employees, designs and manufactures commercial play structures and recreation site amenities — such as park benches — using recycled plastic.

“I can feel good about getting out of bed every day (because I'm) doing something good for children,” Ogden said. “And at the same time it's an environmentally responsible product, so there's sort of a dual happiness.”

Progressive Design Playgrounds was owned by architect Ali Bemanian for 14 years.

Ogden and Ryan, who have marketing and technology backgrounds and worked for America Online for several years, wanted to own their own business. They also wanted to be in a stable industry, and one conducive to having a family.

“Technology was a constant sprint,” said Ryan, the company's vice president of communication. “In (the playground) industry, we're able to work at a steady pace to grow the company.”

Ogden said he and his wife weren't necessarily looking to get into the playground industry, but after meeting Bemanian and learning about the playground business, he saw it as a good fit.

“I thought with my background in sales, marketing and business development, we could take a very successful company and make it even more successful,” he said.

His plan is working so far, he said, because revenues are up from last year.

Ogden said most of his playgrounds are 90 percent recycled high-density polyethylene, which is the same grade of plastic used for making milk jugs. The other 10 percent is steel and roto-molded plastic, which is not necessarily recycled material.

About 10 percent of the \$500 million playground industry in this country uses recycled plastic, Ogden said. He said his chief national competitors — such as GameTime and Miracle Playground Sales — primarily use steel and wood to make their structures.

Progressive's play equipment is designed on AutoCAD computer software. All of the playgrounds are made with bright colors that kids are drawn to, such as red, blue and green. The company designs and builds five to 10 play structures each week.

Ogden said the company can design the structures as they like, as long as they meet safety guidelines set by The International Playground Equipment Manufacturers Association, The Consumer Product Safety Commission and the American Society for Testing and Materials.

The average price for one of the play structures is \$10,000 to \$15,000.

The customers are mostly parks and schools, and two-thirds of them are in San Diego County.

The company's playgrounds are at about 60 San Diego city school sites, said David Gravagno, an architectural drafting technician for the district.

The city of San Marcos has purchased more than a dozen of the playgrounds during the last six years, said Sheila Busch, parks supervisor.

Busch said the city's goal is to offer the public quality playgrounds that require little maintenance.

“These don't need to be painted, they don't rust and they don't chip,” she said. “We liked the fact that they are recycling a commodity.”

The city likes to support Progressive Design Playgrounds because it is a local business, she said.

While most of the company's business is local, the play structures are distributed nationally and internationally.

Ogden said his goal is to increase those sales. “We've been so successful here in Southern California and in San Diego that I want to replicate that nationally,” he said.

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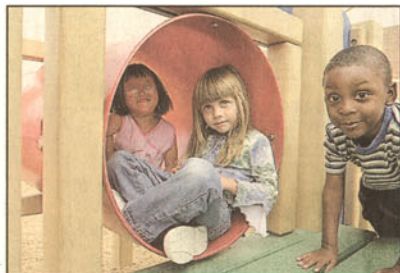


Progressive Design Playgrounds employee Charles Hayes used a router to round off the sharp edges of a recycled plastic lumber board. The board will be used in playground decking. The shavings are recycled and collected.

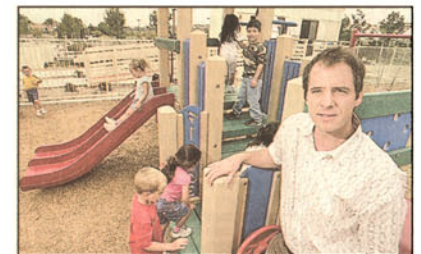
Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune photos



Gov. Bob Taft bask



Mary Grace Toal (left), Allison Didier and Christian Gilmore, preschoolers at Lighthouse Christian Church, played on equipment made by Progressive Design Playgrounds.



John Ogden, president of Progressive Design Playgrounds, said 90 percent of his company's equipment is made from recycled plastic. Most of the company's sales are to local institutions, such as Lighthouse Christian Church.