

ROCK STAR

A recent spate of industry and business awards has thrust Maine Drilling & Blasting's Bill Purington into the public spotlight

BILL PURINGTON DOESN'T sound like a "rock star." He sounds humble, down-to-earth, and characteristically low-key when having to answer questions about himself and his achievements during an early morning phone interview from Maine Drilling & Blasting's (MD&B) offices in Gardiner.

Still "rock star" is how U.S. Senator Susan Collins described the central Maine businessman when she introduced Purington at the recent Kennebec Valley Chamber's annual awards ceremony in January.

"In the construction industry here in Maine and around the country, Bill truly is a rock star," said Collins as she presented Purington with the chamber's Business Person of the Year award. "And before you blame me for a bad pun, let me remind you that Bill chose for his company slogan 'Setting Earth-Shattering Standards Since 1966.'"

Purington admits to being more than a little surprised by all the attention he has been getting lately – and by what it all means.

Purington first heard last fall he was to receive the award. It was just after he had received the Major Achievement in Construction award from AGCMaine. Knowing that awards like these often were given at the end of a career, he admits to being a little taken aback, because he considers himself to be anywhere but near retirement.

"I was honored and very appreciative, but I began to ask myself, 'What's going on here? Is there something I need to know about?'" joked Purington.

Purington is clearly uncomfortable accepting kudos for the phenomenal success of his family's business, and he admits to being "conflicted" about all of the attention. He says that is because MD&B is and always has been a family business. "How do you recognize one family member over the others who have given so much to the business?" asked Purington. He is also quick to give credit to the wide



Bill Purington began working for the family business in his teens, attended the University of Hampshire and worked for other companies before returning to MD&B in the 1980s.

circle of family, friends and business associates for the role they have played in MD&B's success.

"Growth and success is all about people in business," said Purington in his acceptance speech. He thanked his wife and family, the Kennebec Valley Chamber and other business organizations for the support they give businesses like MD&B. He said that none of his achievements would have been possible "without good people behind the scenes lobbying for commerce and the community."

MD&B was founded in 1966 when Bill's dad and mother, Ted and Judy Purington, borrowed \$2,000 to get the company off the ground. Over the past 42 years, the company has been built on hard work, honesty and quality of service. Those were characteristics his father drummed into Bill and his brothers, Ted, Jr., Jim and Tom – characteristics

that have guided the firm to this day.

Like his brothers, Bill grew up in the business, and being a part of the family business has had its challenges, said Purington. "My dad was a very demanding person. He had a lot of expectations for us."

For instance, all the sons were expected to pull their weight in the business. By the age of 14, Bill and his brothers were all working. Bill worked in the family business through his high school years (he attended Gardiner Area High School). He graduated high school in 1977, and it was at that point, he decided the family business wasn't for him.

"I didn't want anything to do with it," Purington said, explaining his decision to attend college. His brothers Ted Jr., Jim and Tom joined MD&B. But Bill went off to earn an associate degree in engineering technology from Keene State College and then a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering with a minor in business administration from the University of New Hampshire.

After graduation, he went on to work as a research and marketing engineer for Bay Head Machinery in New Hampshire. In 1982, he was on his way to work in California when the call came asking him to come back to MD&B as general manager. The company had seen rapid expansion during the 1970s and early 80s, but the fast growth – and a severe national economic downturn – had stretched the firm's capacity to its limits.

A longer season

With his business experience, Bill immediately reorganized the company and modified its business plan. The new plan called for expansion, because MD&B's new general manager saw that if the business was to grow, it needed room to grow. The biggest impediment? Maine's short construction season.

"We would work our tails off during the season here in Maine and then spend the next five months trying to hold on to whatever we had," said Purington. "You don't

have to go too far to see the opportunities of a longer season.”

Compared to Maine, where the company’s crew and equipment would lie idle for up to five months out of the year, Purington saw the extended seasonal opportunities in nearby states. In Connecticut, the season offered 10 or 11 months of solid work, with only one or two months of down time. Even in New Hampshire, MD&B crews could be working one or two more months out of the year.

Purington also brought a new management style to the business. He instituted a more formal corporate culture – based on the tenets of hard work, honesty and customer service espoused by his father – that professionalized the company. The result has been a workplace culture with a family-like sense of commitment and loyalty, a place where top quality people chose to work.

Purington is quick to share the credit for the company’s growth with his father and brothers. His father, he said, established a rock-solid foundation for the company and instilled a strong work ethic in his children. His brothers developed the technical expertise and operational experience that earned



(L to R) Jim Purington, Tom Purington, Bill Purington, Ted Purington, Jr., in 2006.

the company respect on every job it performs. Thanks to them, said Bill, MD&B, stands on the leading edge of blasting technology and safety.

He also credits the men and women he works with daily for their role in helping to build the company. "Our success is all about damn good people," said Purington at the awards ceremony. "We have people that are willing to manage risk and change on a daily basis. Enthusiastic and engaged people. People caring to do more than what they have to do, willing to do what is right."

To recognize its employees' contributions, MD&B instituted an employee stock option plan in 2004 and, as of 2007, the employees owned 22 per cent of the company.

Today, MD&B is a powerhouse in the industry. It has offices in six states, more than a dozen distribution facilities, 12 bulk trucks, more than 100 drilling rigs, a company-designed modular bulk program, including six micro-pumpers for smaller, local jobs, and stands on the leading edge of blasting technology and safety.

MD&B recently acquired Atlantic Blasting of Milton, Massachusetts, giving the business a firmer foothold in that corner of the region. While the first two decades of the business were built on expansion of the interstate system, more recently, the company has taken advantage of opportunities in renewable energy – including work on wind farms and geothermal installations.

The way forward

Purington sees renewable energy – and strategic investments in infrastructure – as being essential as the region struggles to recover from the current recession. He talks about surviving the inflation and high interest rates



Maine Senator Susan Collins called Bill Purington a "rock star" when she presented him with the Kennebec Valley Chamber's Business Person of the Year Award.

during the late 1970s and the deep recession that hit New England from 1989 to 1991. He talks about MD&B's efforts to build its business and diversify without over-leveraging assets.

That same kind of financial good sense and strategic planning, he said, would help Maine weather the challenging times ahead. As you would expect from someone with a strong business background, he talks in terms of a business balance sheet and how spending on social programs has outpaced the state's revenue-generating investments.

He said Maine needs a better financial platform for maintaining a safe and efficient transportation network because transportation is so fundamental to a healthy business

climate. Preserving a dedicated fuel tax is part of the solution, but so is looking at other options, including perhaps, tolls.

"We absolutely, definitely have to be creative," said Purington. He said Maine needs to be thinking ahead and using the resources it has to the best advantage. That means building an east-west highway with public and/or private funding and taking advantage of the state's geographic connections with Canada. He believes Maine should use its ports more effectively and support investment in new energy sources, including tidal power and liquid natural gas.

"We need a business mindset," said Purington. "We need to get government in balance, or it won't work." ■