

Businessman chooses new career to stay here

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Chronicle/Cory MorseChris

Pauwels, former general manager for Bekaert, made a new career for himself after the Muskegon plant closed because his family wanted to stay here. Pauwels now is a consultant for Advisa, based in Indianapolis.

Born and raised in Belgium, Chris Pauwels is a former South African industrial manager who has lived

and worked on many continents.

But when his Bekaert Corp. wire plant in Muskegon closed in 2007, Pauwels and his family had seen enough of the world. They had fallen in love with Muskegon and wanted to stay.

Bekaert's Muskegon operations provided wire products mainly to a struggling automotive industry, but the company offered Pauwels an opportunity to continue his career with the Belgium company in Brazil, China, India or Russia. He talked to his family and said no.

The former Bekaert general manager was forced to recreate his career, becoming the West Michigan management consultant for Advisa -- an Indianapolis-based company providing services concerning workplace behavior.

"We love it here ... we've picked up such good friends," Pauwels said of Muskegon and how his wife, Marlies, and their three children have taken to West Michigan. "Marlies was not keen to move. People have been very welcoming here."

With their oldest studying at Michigan State University and two children in the Mona Shores Public Schools, Pauwels looked for industrial management jobs in the area. An unsuccessful stint operating a factory in northern Indiana had Pauwels commuting for nine months until the company no longer needed him when it lost business through a merger.

An advertisement for a management consultant for Advisa peaked his curiosity. When he explored the Indiana company, he knew it was a good fit for his second career. Pauwels now works with industrial clients but also those in banking, health care and several other sectors.

"Business is facing enormous changes and I have lived those changes," Pauwels said of his new consulting work. "Muskegon has lived those changes."

"The expectation of business today is that workers will use their brains, not just their muscles," he continued. "They will not just stand behind a machine. We now have to get workers engaged, motivated and inspired because if you are involved with something you like to do, you'll do it better."

"We help organizations become more confident, having bosses manage in the right way."

That the Pauwels family stayed in Muskegon for "quality of life" issues speaks volumes about how such personal decisions on where to live affect a community's job-creation efforts. Muskegon Area First President Ed Garner said younger generations of workers are deciding where to live and then go about finding a job, which is what Pauwels did after Bekaert closed in Muskegon.

"Quality of life is very important; oftentimes CEOs or their spouses and families decide where they want to live, which is where the company will be located," Garner said. "Being by the lakeshore, our community has advantages not found in other places."

Settling down in a place called Muskegon would have been the last thought on Pauwels' mind as he launched his industrial career in the early 1980s. Born near Brussels, Pauwels went to Catholic schools and graduated from the Catholic University of Leuven with a degree in engineering and metallurgy.

In 1982, there were few jobs in Belgium but industry was humming in South Africa. A recruiter got Pauwels to take a job for ISCOR, the country's leading steel company located in Vanderbijlpark, 40

miles south of Johannesburg.

After two years, he moved to Consolidated Wire Industries Ltd. in the same city, a company where he stayed for 12 years. He married a South African woman of Dutch descent and they began raising their family.

By 1996, South Africa was an "impressive" place, Pauwels said. Revolution and reform of the racially separate society was in full force.

"Politically and economically, the country was going amazingly well," Pauwels said. "But security was the issue that drove us out. It was a daily concern. There were areas you just couldn't go. It was a sad thing."

At home, the Pauwels lived behind concrete walls and barbed-wire fences with steel bars on the windows and bedrooms secured by steel doors in case intruders entered the house during the night. The family decided it was no place to raise small children.

His company's technology agreement with Belgium-based Bekaert Corp. led to a new job opportunity. The \$5.5 billion steel wire manufacturer had plant management needs in South America and Fort Smith, Ark. It was off to the United States for the Pauwels.

The Bekaert plant produced wire products for the agricultural sector in a 500,000-square-foot Arkansas plant that employed 275. Pauwels, who had received his master's of business administration from the University of Potchefstroom in South Africa in 1990, moved to Fort Smith in 1997 to become general manager of the Bekaert plant.

There were some tough times for his wife's transition to living in the America. But the family found more retail and restaurant opportunities than in South Africa and then there was the warm Southern hospitality. They were surprised at the high quality of the school system.

"I was amazed that you could leave your garage door open overnight and your stuff was still there in the morning," Pauwels said, comparing the family's new home with life back in South Africa. They stayed three years until Bekaert wanted Pauwels to take over management of their plant in Muskegon. The family arrived here in 2000.

His plant supplied the Big Three automakers and other parts suppliers, including spring makers. Pauwels job included management of a plant near Akron, Ohio. The 90,000-square-foot Muskegon plant had 90 workers who were represented by the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers union.

Pauwels ran the plant for seven years, but the wire business became more difficult as the auto companies demanded cost reductions. There was no way plants paying American union workers could compete for contracts against overseas operations where labor costs were a fraction of the Muskegon plant, he said.

"We just couldn't do it," Pauwels said.

While in Muskegon, the Pauwels built their dream house in the Churchill school area of Norton Shores. They loved their small-town, Midwestern lifestyle. But Bekaert tempted him with opportunities to manage manufacturing plants in India, China, Russia and Brazil.

He declined.

"I did well with the company, but it was time to leave," Pauwels said. "I didn't like my options at Bekaert."

Now management consultant for Advisa for Western Michigan, Pauwels is working with the company's existing clients from Benton Harbor to Traverse City, including Grand Rapids and Muskegon. He also is looking to increase the Advisa business in the region.

"Through my career, I have always been working with people," he said. "I'm now in the right spot."

Advisa provides hiring and staffing decision-making assistance. The company will define the behavioral needs of a job, conduct the candidate search and screen candidates to find the best fit for the company and the new employee.

Advisa clients in West Michigan range from the Gerber Federal Credit Union in Fremont to Shape Corp. in Grand Haven.

"We bring personality to the forefront in what we do to help our managers," Pauwels said. "We try to get the maximum out of their people."

That thing you do

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