



Zirkle presented with 2012 Sam Volpentest Entrepreneurial Leadership Award

By Mary Hopkin for TCAJoB

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Dr. Lewis Zirkle, founder of the nonprofit Surgical Implant Generation Network in Richland, was presented with the Sam Volpentest Entrepreneur during the 15th Annual Richland Rotary Entrepreneurial Awards at the Richland Red Lion in February.

The award is presented to the who possess leadership in the community and have contributed to entrepreneurship either by being an entrepreneur or by fostering entrepreneurial spirit through job creation, companies, mentorship, programs and services.

Zirkle, a local orthopedic surgeon, started SIGN in 1999. Zirkle often donated his time and talent overseas, training orthopedic surgeons. On a trip to Indonesia, he discovered a man who had been bedridden for three years due to a severe fracture in his leg. Patients in many poor nations across the world can't afford the implants that would allow them to walk. Zirkle realized that teaching surgeons in third world countries how to repair the fractures was of little use if they didn't have a steady supply of implants to use. So Zirkle designed and patented the "intramedullary nail" a strong, round nail with interlocking screws that can be used to repair fractures of the femur, tibia and humerus in very basic hospitals where often X-ray and high-tech surgical tools are not available. Then he started manufacturing the nails and sending them to rural hospitals in developing countries around the world and teaching surgeons there how to use them.

Thus SIGN was born, but nobody envisioned how quickly and large it would grow. The nonprofit started in a small corner of a 39,000 sq. ft. building in North Richland. Now it leases the entire property from the Port of Benton, sub-leasing out a restaurant space in the front portion of the building. In early 2002, SIGN's nails were being sent to 14 developing nations. Now, the nails are distributed to more than 200 hospitals in 47 countries, including areas of conflict, like Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the company has a staff of more than 20.

"We have 5,000 surgeons around the world and think of them all as family," said Zirkle at the ceremony. "We also think of you in the Tri-Cities as family, because you all have helped so much."

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