

Thursday, Oct. 12, 2000



**Left:** Dennis Simmelink, President of Unibest International Corp. of Richland, holds a PST-1 Resin Capsule used in the company's soil-sampling technology. Unibest is one of four Tri-City companies that were invited to present their businesses to the Alliance of Angels, a group of private investors from Seattle.

**Below:** Loren Szendre works on Szen Corp.'s software package Monday at his Kennewick office. The software is designed to provide point of sale, inventory and payroll support for golf courses, restaurants and retail stores. Investments for successful presenters could range from \$50,000 to \$1 million.

Herald photos by  
Katharine Kimball (left)  
and André Ranieri

## Looking for a hand

*Tri-City tech companies pitch wares to Seattle investors*

**By Wendy Culverwell**  
Herald staff writer

**F**our young Tri-City companies received an unusual chance to pitch their companies to some of the region's leading investors this week. The four were selected from a field of more than a dozen companies to discuss their products and business plans with members of the Alliance of Angels, an ultrasecret group of private investors from Seattle. In the high-tech world, "angels" are investors who help technology-related companies get off the ground. The angels, or more accurately, their representatives, made a rare foray Wednesday to the Tri-Cities. The four lucky companies were invited to give brief presentations to the group in hopes one or more angel investors would provide financial support. Not all companies picked to make presentations receive any backing, but investments for those that succeed can range

from \$50,000 to \$1 million. According to the group's Web site, about 65 percent of companies that present to the group receive some sort of backing. In addition, about 10 percent of the companies that have presented business plans in the past subsequently issued stock to the public or were acquired by publicly traded companies.

The four Tri-City companies are:

### **Szen Corp.**

- **Contact:** Loren Szendre, president, or Dustin Anderson, co-founder, 737-0505.
- **Established:** June 1999.
- **Employees:** About 20, including full- and part-time.
- **Home base:** Kennewick's "flashcube" building, 7601 W. Clearwater Ave.
- **What does it do?** The company has developed software for managing golf courses, retail centers and restaurants. Local clients include the golf course at

See **Hand**, Page C2



# Hand: Company founders envision bright futures for their businesses

Continued from C1

Canyon Lakes. Szen Corp. also is working with a major resort to provide comprehensive facilities management and accounting software.

■ **Market:** More than 24,000 golf facilities are located in the United States, as well as countless more resorts, stores and restaurants.

■ **Background:** Company president Szendre wrote his first retail management program in Chicago when friends needed a point-of-sale retail system for their clothing store.

After he moved home to Kennewick 18 months ago, Szendre noticed the pros at the Canyon Lakes golf course were doing business with pencil and paper.

He quizzed them about it and learned they were poised to invest in a computerized course management system. Szendre persuaded them to consider his program, then went home to begin working on it. The resulting system is in place at 14 golf courses in Washington, Oregon and Canada, and 11 more systems are on order.

Szen Corp. has received technical support from Pacific Northwest National Laboratory under its program to promote technology-related economic development in the Tri-Cities.

■ **Goal:** To build the company. That means increasing its sales staff, technical support and other functions.

## Unibest Corp.

■ **Contact:** Dennis Simmelink, 947-0766.

■ **Established:** Jan. 1.

■ **Employees:** Owner Simmelink

and his uncle Earl Skogley.

■ **Home base:** The Agricultural Business Development Center (ABCD) at the Port of Benton in Richland.

■ **What does it do?** Simmelink, a third-generation dryland wheat farmer, is commercializing a soil-sampling technology developed by Skogley, professor emeritus at Montana State University.

The technology consists of marble-size balls made of wire mesh and containing special beads of resin. The resin balls absorb minerals, elements and nutrients from the soil, much like plants. The capsules are then analyzed in the lab for content.

The technology also can be used in smokestacks and water to analyze for virtually every known element. There are more than 300 variations.

■ **Goal:** Simmelink says the testing technology is so easy and cheap, it has the potential to revolutionize environmental testing and become a multibillion-dollar industry, a figure he concedes may sound grandiose in print.

He needs \$950,000 to develop a state-of-the-art laboratory to analyze data. For now, analysis is performed at PNNL's Environmental Molecular Sciences Laboratory.

■ **Market:** Anyone who samples soil, air or water for hazardous materials, chemical content or nutrient content. For example, Simmelink and Skogley say the technology could be used to track the chromium plume at the Hanford site.

It also offers farmers an inexpensive way to determine if they need to apply fertilizers. Another possible use would be for golf courses, which

would test soil before fertilizing, reducing the use of chemicals and subsequent runoff into sensitive streams and wetlands.

■ **Background:** The idea dates back to 1953, when Skogley was working in a soil testing lab as an undergraduate at North Dakota State University and thought, "There has to be a better way than chemical extraction."

He spent the next 35 years of his career researching resin exchange technology.

## Sunna Systems

■ **Contacts:** Steve Miller or Alex Fassbender, 375-3130.

■ **Established:** August 1996.

■ **Employees:** Miller, Fassbender and Mark Murphy.

■ **Home base:** Port of Benton in Richland.

■ **What does it do?** Sunna Systems is commercializing dosimeter technology that can be used to measure radiation exposure. Specially treated molded plastic chips are inserted in a mechanical reader that determines the level of exposure.

■ **Goal:** To aggressively market the Sunna dosimeter system. The company projects annual revenues of \$10 million to \$14 million in annual sales in five years.

■ **Market:** Sunna aims to sell its chips and readers to the growing irradiation industry. A chip is placed with a batch



Fassbender



Murphy

of items to be irradiated. At the end of the procedure, the chip is inserted in the reader to ensure the products received the correct radiation dose. The chip then is thrown away, and a new one is used the next time.

The market for irradiation-related equipment appears to be growing. Already, most medical supplies, including adhesive bandages, are irradiated before being shipped to customers. There is also an increasing demand for irradiation for the food industry, especially exporters who must assure foreign governments their products carry no breeding insects.

The chemical most often used, methyl bromide, is poisonous and a greenhouse gas. It will be banned worldwide in coming years and manufacturers have already announced plans to discontinue it, sending companies looking for an alternative.

■ **Background:** Miller developed the



Miller

technology as a researcher at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. Sunna licensed the technology from PNNL and is a spin-off. Miller and Fassbender work part-time at the lab but want to move full-time into Sunna.

## IsoRay LLC

■ **Contact:** Don Segna, 946-4859.

■ **Established:** 1997.

■ **Employees:** 11 co-owners.

■ **Home base:** The 11 co-founders currently work out of their homes.

■ **What does it do:** IsoRay produces isotopes for the treatment of cancer and wants to bring its production line to the Tri-Cities because the expertise is here, the equipment is here and the community is "nuclear-friendly."

■ **Market:** The cancer treatment industry.

■ **Goal:** Segna, a founder and the group's general manager, said IsoRay needs funding to test its product and get it market.

■ **Background:** IsoRay has received support from PNNL during much of its development but is not a spin-off company. Segna, who retired from the Department of Energy, said he never intended to take up a new profession but kept hearing about the promise of IsoRay's program and agreed to come on board.

■ **Reporter Wendy Culverwell can be reached at 582-1537 or via e-mail at [wculverwell@tri-cityherald.com](mailto:wculverwell@tri-cityherald.com).**