



Lake EDC Monthly Business Showcase

Stokes Ladders: Manufacturing in Lake County, CA for International Use Since 1963

By Andy Lucas, Lake EDC Staff
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The Stokes family has been building high quality ladders, one at a time, for almost 60 years in Lake County. I recently sat down with Greg Panella, President to discuss the family business and the business climate in Lake County.

F.R. "Russ" Stokes began building aluminum ladders in his garage in Kelseyville, CA in the early 1960s because, as a pear grower, he didn't like the cumbersome design of the orchard ladders coming into Lake County, a world-renowned pear growing region. He used his Structural Engineering education and his background at Lockheed during World War II to design his own aluminum orchard ladder. Local area farmers liked the ladders so much that production soon outgrew the garage. In 1966, the business incorporated as F. R. Stokes, Inc., and

the operation moved about one-half mile closer to the corner of the Stokes pear orchard at 4545 Renfro Drive, Kelseyville CA. The business was successful and continued to grow, employing 12 people.

In October, 2012, Greg Panella, the grandson of Russ Stokes, and his wife purchased the family business. Greg has a mechanical mind and a love for agriculture. He worked summers at the ladder shop, attended Kelseyville schools, and participated in Future Farmers of America, becoming one of the best ag mechanic students in the state of California. Greg then spent four years in the United States Marine Corps, honorably serving in Iraq, before moving back to Kelseyville.

Since its formation, F.R. Stokes, Inc., and Stokes Ladders, Inc., have manufactured high quality aluminum agricultural ladders. The tripod ladder has now become widely popular in the landscape maintenance and arborist industries. With the addition of the telescoping third leg and hard surface kit, the Stokes tripod can now be used in locations that were previously unsafe for an orchard ladder to be used. The export market has increased and there are now Stokes Ladders in a good number of countries. Stokes aluminum orchard ladders are known as the orchardists' choice because of their stability and durability.

While building and selling orchard ladders was Stokes' main thrust, other ladders also came into being. In the 1970s, various models of step stools and industrial ladders were developed and sold. In the late 1980s, Stokes began building and selling aluminum posting ladders. In the early 1990s, they began

making posting ladders from fiberglass. In the mid-1990s, the first rolling winery ladders were built.

Stokes continues to be the leader in niche ladder markets that require high quality, durability and value.

The secret to their success and longevity is actually quite simple: they engineer quality, durability, safety and excellence into every ladder they make. They are so focused on this that a customer compliment has become their mantra and promise: Standing on a Stokes ladder is "like standing on the ground."

Stokes is driven by the desire to help people reach what they need to reach and climb to where they need to climb as safely as possible. That is why they don't cut corners on materials or craftsmanship, and all of their ladders have features that improve their stability and durability – and a stable, durable, well-built ladder is a safer ladder.

As a manufacturer based in Lake County that provides quality jobs and benefits to their twelve full time employees, Stokes is an example of what is possible for businesses in Lake County: longevity, international clientele, skilled workforce, and profit. Stokes has nearly 1,000 satisfied clients worldwide and exports right from their shop in Lake County, California.

Although recent tariffs imposed at the federal level on imported manufacturing materials have drastically raised the price of even the domestic aluminum and fasteners that Stokes uses, and the several natural disasters, including the largest wildfire in California history, have impacted the business and Lake County, Panella says that his business is doing well and that this is home.

"Lake County is a good place to do business," Panella said, adding that "the agricultural roots of Lake County and the backing and support of the community really make this a good place to do business and raise a family."

Panella believes that "education is a critical means to entrepreneur and business development," and sits on

the advisory committee of the Career Technical Education Program at Kelseyville High School. "In rural communities like ours, there is a large population of youth that either can't afford to go to a four-year school, or are simply not interested. Kelseyville High School has an amazing array of CTE programs ranging from construction, electrical, agriculture, all the way to computer coding and graphic design. These teach our youth a trade that can earn them a livable wage in our community, in addition to a well-trained workforce for employers to pull from."

Panella and wife, Allison, welcomed their third child just over six months ago. Allison serves on the Kelseyville School Board, and was also recently appointed as the new Executive Director of Hope Rising, a community health collaborative.

Stokes ladders, Inc., are helping people do all sorts of interesting things like picking fruit, pruning trees, washing cars, making and servicing aircraft, maintaining barges, hanging billboards and improving performance in a wide variety of manufacturing and maintenance environments.

Stokes Ladders, Inc. is helping the community of Lake County by providing skilled, well paying positions, insight and advice for up and coming entrepreneurs and trades people, and support of community wellness initiatives, all while keeping the business profitable for nearly 60 years.

Here's to another 60 years of the same! Stokes Ladders, "Any Climb, Any Place!"

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INDUSTRIAL



ORCHARD



STOOLS & STANDS



WINERY

The Lake Economic Development Corporation (Lake EDC) is a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit corporation established in 1983. The purpose of the Lake EDC is to facilitate the creation, retention, expansion, and attraction of businesses in Lake County. Lake EDC services include:

- ✓ Business financing and access to capital from multiple sources, including our own USDA business loan program. The LCEDC has approved 31 loans to Lake County businesses, totaling over \$3,200,000. Over 300 jobs have been created or retained as a result of this program.
- ✓ Help with startup, expansion, and business sale strategies.
- ✓ Business education through workshops and one-on-one consultations with marketing, website development, managing cashflow, using QuickBooks, preparing a business plan, customer service, networking services and working with lenders.
- ✓ Housing Fairs for the USDA 502 Direct Loan and Loan Guarantee programs, home loan packaging, working with Realtors, brokers, and contractors to increase housing for working families.

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