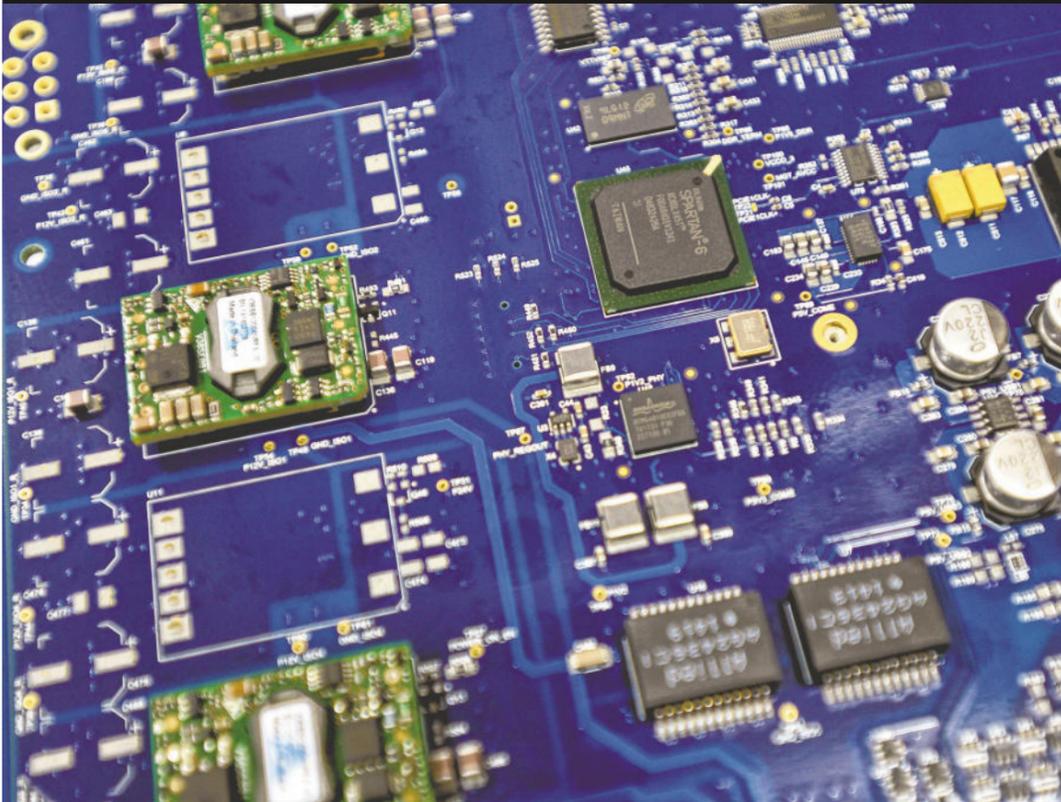


RENAISSANCE MAN

TOM O'HANLAN'S INTERESTS COVER
TREE FARMS TO COMPUTER PARTS



Sealevel, the company founded by Tom O'Hanlan, builds industrial computers, like the computer docking stations for military use seen above right, and custom parts that can't be found in stores. The company also has started working with 3D printing technology, above left. MYKAL MCELLOWNEY/STAFF

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Tom O'Hanlan has done everything from woodworking to designing and building computer components for the space shuttle.

O'Hanlan, the CEO of Sealevel Systems Inc. in Liberty, is also a musician, a tree farmer, an avid reader, a bird hunter, an author, an inventor and community activist. The former Liberty town council member rebuilds organs, loves art, is into boating, got into Harleys and tried flying.

"I do things just to learn and sometimes then move on," said O'Hanlan. "I have a passion for learning. Maybe it's ADD."

THAT OTHER PASSION

He can't read it, but he can play it. Visit GreenvilleOnline.com to hear Sealevel Systems founder Tom O'Hanlan talk about his passion for music.

Even if that's the diagnosis, it doesn't appear to have been a hindrance to O'Hanlan's business or personal success.

His nearly 30-year-old company builds industrial computers and custom parts that can't be found in stores, like that board for NASA or the computer board FedEx bought to hook up to scanners in all of its warehouses and depots.

O'Hanlan has the ability to take his knowledge and enthusiasm and solve complex problems, said Brice Bay, a friend and found-

er of EnVeritas Group, a digital marketing agency in Greenville.

"He's got an amazing mind," Bay said.

O'Hanlan and his wife, Susan, started Sealevel Systems in 1986, in the basement of a computer store on the US 123 Bypass in Easley.

It initially offered custom circuit boards that plugged into IBM personal computers and allowed them to talk to controls in factories and to control themselves, O'Hanlan said.

In 1984, he designed the first RS-422/485 communication adapter for the IBM PC. He also has been awarded two U.S. patents — one for an error detecting system and another for a communication device.

Today, Sealevel offers hardware and soft-

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Tom O'Hanlan says when he's asked what Sealevel does, he often says, "We make weird stuff." A more detailed explanation, he says, might not be understood. MYKAL MCELLOWNEY/STAFF

O'HANLAN

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were products to enable computer connectivity and control, manufacturing more than 300 standard I/O products with ISO 9001: 2000 registration.

"We went from just boards to hardened, rugged industrial computers — a PC that will work in a real high temperature environment and won't fail," O'Hanlan said.

Sealevel's computers are generally sold to other businesses and used in a variety of vertical markets such as public safety, process control to an assembly line, medical products, transportation applications, broadcast, oil and gas, and mining.

The company has evolved to doing predominantly custom solutions, meaning "a lot of what we make we don't sell to anybody else but the customer," he said.

Well-rounded

O'Hanlan and his wife came to the Upstate from Virginia when his job at National Cash Register transferred him to Liberty.

They opened the business at a time when the the Upstate was still dominated by textiles and apparel manufacturing, said Mack Whittle, a former bank chairman and a friend.

Whittle, who travels with the O'Hanlans as members of organizations they're part of, said he considers O'Hanlan a "modern day Renaissance man."

"He's very creative from a business perspective as well as from an arts and a music perspective," Whittle said. "He loves to hunt, to fish, get in the boat. He loves to have fun. He's far more rounded than a lot of people who are in the kind of business he's in."

O'Hanlan was born in Waynesboro, Virginia, a city about the size of Easley, located about 90 miles northwest of Richmond.

His father was Dr. Treacy O'Hanlan, a general surgeon and inventor of medical devices, and his mother, Elizabeth Booker O'Hanlan, was a registered nurse.

In addition to his parents, O'Hanlan was influenced by his grandfather, Dr. Lyle Steele Booker, who he never met.

Booker performed the first surgery at the newly built Duke University Hospital. He was also a real estate developer and developed the Hope Valley area in Durham, North Carolina, O'Hanlan said. And he owned the Durham Bulls baseball team.

O'Hanlan said his mom used to tell him he was a Booker in that he always wanted to make money.

At the age of 9, he was selling seeds he'd get from companies listed in the back of comic books. If you sold enough of the seeds, you could win a walkie-talkie or bicycle, he said.



One of O'Hanlan's passions is playing the bass guitar, which he first picked up in seventh grade. In high school he played in a band that bore his name. Here he plays a tune on his 1971 Fender Precision bass guitar. MYKAL MCELLOWNEY/STAFF

He also went door to door selling soap. And when his brother developed problems with his leg, O'Hanlan did his paper route for him.

There were five kids in the family, and "I was the only one that did that kind of stuff," he said.

O'Hanlan also had a knack for fixing things or taking them apart to see what made them work, including the broken stereo system his best friend's dad gave to him.

He was in the seventh grade when he began playing the bass guitar. His first guitar amplifier was one he made using his parents' old record player.

While in high school, he was a member of a band that bore his name.

He met his wife in high school when she hired his band to play for a party.

"She loves to say 'and he's still working for me,' and I am," he said.

The couple was married while they were in college. His son, Ben, president of Sealevel, was less than a year old when he attended his father's college graduation.

Their daughter, Sarah Beasley, is the company's vice president of brand development

Giving back

One thing that's important to O'Hanlan is giving back. One of his proudest accomplishments has been the start of Manufacturers Caring for Pickens County, a group consisting of CEOs, entrepreneurs and other leaders, whose goal is to "reach out to the Pickens County community, to enhance, develop and enrich our socioeconomic values and conditions to higher and higher levels."

The organization is active in the local schools, promoting STEM education.

O'Hanlan himself floundered around a bit in high school, unsure of what he

wanted to do.

"I had to drop out of college my first year before I realized I could get a degree in engineering. I didn't know you could get a degree in electronics and become an electrical engineer. It took the school of hard knocks to kind of figure that out but I'm glad I did," O'Hanlan said.

He first attended Bridgewater College, a liberal arts school in Virginia, and flunked out by spring break.

"It was like high school but harder, and I hated high school. But I got to do an independent study during spring break on synthesizers," he said. "I got an A."

O'Hanlan went to work for a plumbing company before returning to school to earn an electronics degree from the two-year college. He then transferred to Virginia Tech and received a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering.

Layoff

After college graduation, the O'Hanlans moved to Delaware where he took a job at NCR.

When the company closed the Delaware plant and moved it to Liberty, the O'Hanlans came with it.

Two years later, NCR started laying off employees here.

"I think my buddies and I were sitting in the cafeteria watching people leave, thinking, 'Man, I'm glad they're not calling our names,'" he said. "Sure enough ... they called our names and we had to leave."

NCR came back after being bought by AT&T. Some of O'Hanlan's friends returned there to work, but "I wasn't going back. That was a lesson to me that you make your own future," he said.

He began doing so by working as a contractor, moonlighting with other textile companies.

He developed products for them and they paid him royalties. All the while, he was gearing up to open his own company.

"I had these products and it had grown to the point where I knew it would fly," he said.

The textile company informed O'Hanlan that it wasn't doing too well. He contacted his father, who co-signed a small loan — \$15,000 — "and we started a business," O'Hanlan said.

O'Hanlan and Susan were the only employees. They had two products and customers.

The textile company that Tom had worked for financed inventory and wished him well.

"We had a deal where if I got a super big order within a year, I'd pay them a commission. That didn't happen but I'm still friends with those guys," O'Hanlan said.

Sea Level

O'Hanlan sought a name for his company that sounded environmental and unlike a computer company.

He came up with Sealevel while driving home, listening to a radio show.

He likened naming the company to naming a baby.

"You're awkward at first with it and then once you do it, you're kind of embarrassed to tell your friends because you feel like you have to explain the name," he said. "After a while, it just rolled off my tongue."

There are some who believe the company was named for the Southern Rock/funk/fusion band, Sea Level, that existed in the 1970s and early '80s.

If you call the Sealevel company today and get put on hold, you'll likely hear tunes from the Sea Level band or the Allman Brothers.

Chuck Leavell, a member of the Allman Brothers Band, formed Sea Level when his old band broke up. Back then, O'Hanlan said, his name was pronounced "Level."

Allman Brothers "roadies" would put C-Leavell on Leavell's road cases, O'Hanlan said.

Leavell, who is now a Rolling Stones keyboardist, and O'Hanlan became friends years ago after O'Hanlan got a chance to meet him at a book signing.

Leavell, like O'Hanlan, is an environmentalist and a tree farmer.

"He's written some books about sustainability, forestation, and that type of stuff. I paid extra to go backstage, shake his hand and get an autograph," O'Hanlan said.

"I took my business card and gave it to him. He looked at it and started laughing. Then he said, 'What do y'all do?'"

The answer to that question is always a complicated one, O'Hanlan said.

"Generally I'll say — and my wife gets mad at me — we make weird stuff," he said. "She's like, 'Why do you keep saying that?' I say, 'Because if I told them, they might not understand.'"