



Inventor and entrepreneur Jim Bradac makes his blow molded products on this Sterling machine he refurbished.

Courtesy of Jim Bradac

→ JUST THE FACTS

NAME: Jim Bradac

WHO IS HE: Owner and inventor, CEO of St. Croix Valley Blow Molding (SCVBM), Hudson, Wis.

AGE: 63

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: About 5

Serial inventor Jim Bradac keeps finding niches to fill

UPPER MIDWEST winters can be brutal. Maybe that's why serial inventor Jim Bradac, the CEO of St. Croix Valley Blow Molding (SCVBM), located in Hudson, Wis., just east of the Twin Cities in Minnesota, takes so much pride in a blow molded, insulated product that protects outdoor cats.

"These little old ladies call me up on Kitty Tubes, and they just sit there and they [praise] me up and down, because 'You're just the greatest soul on Earth to invent this product,'" Bradac said.

Bradac's Kitty Tube evolved from his first invention, the Ceme-Tube, which concrete pourers can use to form the bases of light poles. That's the business that took him from working with metal in the early 2000s to working with LDPE and HDPE, and it's one he's hoping to sell, he told Karen Hanna, senior staff writer for *Plastics Machinery & Manufacturing*, during a conversation about balancing a growing portfolio of innovations with being the father to 10 kids.

How did you get started in plastics?

Bradac: My first invention started around 2007.

I used to work with only stainless steel. A couple years out of high school, I tried to decide what I wanted to do for life. I decided to be a sheet metal worker. ... We used to install restaurant equipment, kitchens and stuff.

Then, I had a great idea of inventing a product, which is the Ceme-Tube.

In the world of concrete forms, have you ever gone to Home Depot and seen cardboard tools for making a deck footing? That is kind of the only thing out there for putting in the ground to pour concrete. There's a lot of issues with the cardboard ones, because they can't get wet.

My plastic ones do not fail. The other good thing is my plastic Ceme-Tubes actually have a collar on one end, so you can stack them to go taller if you need to.

Mine are plastic, and they're colored. They can use those instead of the cardboard tubes, and just leave the plastic right on there, and it

looks nice. They have, like, 900 KwikTrip [convenience] stores; they use my Ceme-Tubes in every single store.

Is production of the Ceme-Tube what led you to establish SCVBM?

Bradac: For the first several years at Ceme-Tube, I outsourced and used [other] companies. ... That was not going so well. I decided, "Hey, if I'm going to be successful, I've got to make these myself."

That was roughly 2017 that I pulled that trigger, and I bought a blow molding machine from Ohio. We have one machine. It's a Sterling, 50-pound accumulator-head. ... It arrived on four semi trucks. I had to completely take it apart and rebuild it from the ground up. ... It was a big job.

It's like a 1998 [model] that had been upgraded a few times. I had to strip it down to nothing. The machine should have gone to the junkyard. ... I turned it into a brand-new machine from the bottom to the top.

How did you know how to put a blow molding machine back together again?

Bradac: That's kind of who I am. I've got an engineering-type mind. Obviously, if you have a blow molded product, you start learning the ins and outs and you understand the procedures. When I finished that machine and installed my whole plant — there was a lot that had to go into that plant to manufacture — there came a point where I turned everything on, and I had to learn how to blow mold.

Tell me about the various products you make now.

Bradac: I have [the] Ceme-Tube business, and that has many models. [SCVBM] molds all my Ceme-Tubes, and it also molds my Kitty Tubes.

In about 2010, when I was already making Ceme-Tubes, my kids had cats, and my wife was allergic to cats, so they can't come in the house.

I took a 24-inch-diameter Ceme-Tube. I cut it down, and put a lid on the bottom and a lid on the top, and I insulated it, put a hole in the side, and I made a really nice cat shelter. That sat outside our house that whole winter; our four cats lived in that thing. When I'd come home at night, it's like, "The cats never come out of this thing. They love it in there." It's funny, because I filled a niche that I didn't know I was filling. ... We sold so many in the first two months that Amazon shut it off because they thought I was maybe not legitimate.

That was just for the first year that we made them from Ceme-Tubes, and then we made a mold specifically to make the Kitty Tube.

I'm a little biased, but this is the highest quality, if you're going to rate cat houses → **BRADAC, P.32**

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out there. Nobody makes a cat house that's insulated and as well-made.

If you ever went on Amazon and looked at some of the reviews, people are just like, "This guy saved my cats' lives. My cats would not have survived without it."

When I came up with the Kitty Tube, I'd been thinking about a keg cooler, because if you ever go to a party where they have a keg, usually it's

PRODUCTS:

Ceme-Tube, a one-time-use blow molded tube that forms the mold for concrete light-pole footers and parking-lot bollards

Kitty Tube, a blow molded, insulated structure initially based on the Ceme-Tube and assembled to accommodate outdoor cats

Keg-A-Tube, a blow molded insulated cooler for beverage kegs

Rodent Barriers, blow molded collars and barriers designed to prevent rodent intrusion into state Department of Transportation (D.O.T.) infrastructure, such as light poles. Also, available under the Rodent Barriers brand are similar barriers designed to prevent the theft of copper wiring from public infrastructure.



Courtesy of Jim Bradac

The Kitty Tube was originally modified from the Ceme-Tube, but is now produced with its own mold.

just a plastic bucket, and the keg is sitting in it and there's ice around it. This is much more refined and decorative. It looks nice. It's very well insulated. It was just a much better mousetrap.

Then, about three years ago, I started working with the [Minnesota] D.O.T. [Department of Transportation], and I invented a product for the D.O.T. Every D.O.T. has issues with rodents getting into the bases of street lights or signal lights. They chew the wires. It causes an extreme amount of damage, and a lot of money to fix it.

Once I started into the rodent thing, I started learning what they needed, and I would just invent something.

[One of SCVBM's latest Rodent Barriers] does two things. One: It eliminates mice from getting

into the light. And two: It clamps the wire at the end of it; otherwise, if a worker is up on a high lift working on a light, and he lets go with that wire, it's going to fall down a pole [because of] gravity. This product I invented actually holds onto the wire, but keeps mice out at the same time.

Three years ago, we made one model for them; today, I make 28 models.

Besides the Rodent Barriers ... I patented a device that goes in the poles to keep people from stealing the copper. [It is a] huge, huge issue in every single state. ... It's sold under my Rodent Barrier business, but it's called a copper wire anti-theft device.

I'm approved in many other states. ... Minnesota alone says they spend millions upon millions fixing rodent damage, not to mention copper wire theft. That runs in the billions upon billions upon millions of damage. It's kind of weird, I'm an inventor, but I started this company that nobody else has a product for.

The Ceme-Tube has gotten to a point that it needs someone bigger than me. I'm the inventor. I can't make them fast enough unless I want to expand and put in many more blow molding machines, and I'm looking to move it to somebody who can do a much better job.

You're hoping to move on from the Ceme-Tube?

Bradac: When you start a company, you start small, and you get what you need to keep growing. But, when it comes to the Ceme-Tube, it's just gotten too big for me. It needs to go to a company that can service distributors nationwide. ...

We have about five [people] right now, sometimes six. When we start up the plant — we have to start the plant up next week and manufacture more Ceme-Tubes — I'll hire a couple more people; if I just need temporary work, I'll get temps.

We're not running around the clock. That takes a lot of manpower, managers and stuff. It's been hard for me to cross that threshold. That's why I decided Ceme-Tube should go to someone who has three shifts, infrastructure and big warehouses.

I want to really concentrate on the Rodent Barriers, and I'm going to keep Kitty Tube awhile, but the Ceme-Tube ... I look forward to that being sold.

Now that you've been operating SCVBM for about a decade, what do you consider yourself — a metal guy, or a plastic guy?

Bradac: I'll always be a steel guy, because that's what I started with. But all my companies involve plastic.

I am an inventor. I have about 12 patents under my belt.



Courtesy of Jim Bradac

Jim Bradac invented the Ceme-Tube, a blow molded form for concrete light-pole bases.

My wife always says, "You probably have more ingenuity than anyone I've ever met." Problem-solving is something I enjoy. I enjoy inventing and product development and figuring out, how can we make this product better? What can we do to make this work?

I've heard that you have 10 kids. Is that true?

Bradac: My oldest is 33; my youngest is 12. We still have six at home. I knew a long time ago I wanted more than two. Part of the reason why I work so hard [is] because I've got to support them all. My one son is making Rodent Barriers right now, and he enjoys it.

Do you still have more inventions in you?

Bradac: There's other inventions that I'm currently working on. I don't plan on retiring anytime soon.

What do you like to do outside work?

Bradac: I have a little lake place up in northern Minnesota, but I don't make it up there very often, I'm so busy. ... I don't go hunting as much as I used to when I was younger, but I love fishing, and I guess my biggest hobby is I love to cook outside over the fire. I call it Big Jim's Cowboy Cookout. ... It's fun. Put on a big party, we bring in horses, and kids ride horses while I cook food. I love being outside and spending time with family.

What would you like to have as your legacy?

Bradac: I guess I'd like to be known as an inventor. If I had to tell you where my strong points are, it's inventing and product development and manufacturing. Eventually, my Ceme-Tubes are going to be at Home Depot and Lowe's and those big box stores, and that's going to be a massive business for somebody. I'm just not the one to do it. 🇺🇸