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SERVING KENT, OTTAWA, MUSKEGON & ALLEGAN (GRAND RAPIDS MSA) AND NINE SURROUNDING WEST MICHIGAN COUNTIES.

## CEO named one of the auto industry's 100 leading women

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GRAND RAPIDS — Rita Williams doesn't like to be in the limelight. She would rather be walking the plant floor, discussing challenges with employees and working out satisfying solutions.

Williams' personal interaction is one of the reasons the CEO of Grand Rapids-based Gill Industries took center stage last month when she was honored by *Automotive News* as one of the 100 Leading Women in the North American Auto Industry.

Among her peers, Williams could be considered an industry veteran. As far back as 1964 Williams can recall talking about the automotive business with her husband John Gill, owner of what was then a stamping operation and tool and die shop. She often would accompany her husband to work, observing firsthand how a die is built.

After Williams successfully raised her 12 children, she began her official career at Gill, taking the position of general manager in 1985. She eagerly accepted the challenge and set about to improve the operation's efficiency and give it a fresh start. "It was the right time," she said.

Over the next 15 years Williams rose up the ranks to become CEO of the family-owned business. Under her guidance the stamping and tooling shop has been transformed into a full-service automotive supplier providing product concept, design and engineering, prototyping and testing, program management and production of complex welded and mechanical assemblies. Its revenues have blossomed from \$8 million in 1985 to \$110 million last year.

The fiscal achievements came despite some dark times as the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) increased their demands on suppliers for higher quality and larger price concessions. Admitted Williams, "It's a struggle to stay ahead."

One of the first things Williams did as general manager was clean up the opera-



Gill Industries CEO Rita Williams displays a variety of the parts her firm supplies for the automotive industry.

itiveness that got me into this."

Decades of insight into the workings of the automotive industry have led Williams to lead Gill Industries on an aggressive path to succeed through major investments in people and technology. "We knew in order to stay competitive and successful, it was necessary to position ourselves to give our customers what they need," said Williams. "Our decision to develop and implement product design capability really enhanced our competence in providing technological solutions for our customers."

Two years ago Gill separated itself from its outside sales force and

went to a full-service in-house marketing team that includes trained engineers and designers. "It was challenging to do. A far-reaching decision, but necessary," Williams said.

Under Williams, Gill has seen many milestones. The company was named GM Supplier of the Year Award in 1994. This year Gill earned supplier honors from Johnson Controls Inc. and Robert Bosch Co.

Being recognized by *Automotive News* is a great honor, said Williams. "I'm privileged to be on the list with these women."

But the Grand Rapids businesswoman is not hanging her hat on past achievements. Williams is now in the process of implementing the Toyota Production System at Gill and is working to establish the Gill Technology Center.

Williams' goal for Gill Industries is to continue to grow the business and keep it a family-owned business. "The way to do that is to surround ourselves with the best people to manage the business," she said. "And I think we've done that."

tion. "It was the traditional tool and die facility where cleanliness wasn't an issue and it drove me out of my mind," she said. "I personally did a lot of scrubbing and cleaning myself."

Williams takes her cues from the plant floor. "I spent a lot of time in the shop with employees, observing and listening," said Williams, who visits the plant floor on a weekly basis.

The personal approach is "the most fun part" of the business for the 66-year-old CEO and most every one of Gill's employees knows her.

"It's the little things that make the difference to the employees," Williams said. "I was out on the plant floor one day and two ladies told me they had been asking for a fan. They needed one. It was a little thing, but it really helped."

Peers describe Williams as soft-spoken, reflective and with the patience of a saint. "You have to be patient raising 12 children," Williams said with a smile.

She is also respected for her sense of intuition. Said Williams, "It was intu-