

Flags fly over IRISS as the international company opens plant in Lakewood Ranch



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LAKWOOD RANCH -- As the flags of several countries billowed around him, IRISS CEO Martin Robinson on Wednesday officially opened the new global headquarters of his company. The former Londoner spoke with passion about his adopted country and got choked up when he mentioned his partner in life and business -- his wife, Deborah -- standing beside him. It was the Robinsons' 21st wedding anniversary and Robinson said it was an appropriate time to open the new location of their manufacturing facility in the Lakewood Ranch Corporate Park. "This is the woman who made me and allowed me to do what I do," Robinson said about his wife, the company's chief operating officer. The 33,000-square-foot, \$6 million facility off Lakewood Ranch Boulevard will enable the manufacturer of industrial-grade infrared windows to continue its 65 percent year-over-year growth. The company, founded in 1997, which moved to the area in 2007; it previously was in a retail center off Lena Road in 5,000 square feet.

The new space will allow IRISS for the first time to bring all of the manufacturing of its products under its own roof. The company installs infrared windows in commercial facilities

that use high energy power like airports, manufacturing plants and stadiums, to reduce direct exposure to energized conductors and reduce the time required for maintenance. The windows allow for safe inspections during events like power surges or failures. "He (Robinson) is the mastermind behind this technology," said Karen Wells, vice president of operations for IRISS. "Every 2.3 hours a person gets killed from an arc flash explosion. With this technology, you are never exposing the technician to harm."

Current clients include the U.S. Postal Service and retailer Neiman Marcus. The company operates distribution facilities in London, Melbourne, Australia, and just opened a new facility in Brazil. The new plant is versatile enough for Robinson to expand his mission. "We'll do the design, stamping, welding, everything out the door," Robinson said. "It will also allow me to work on new projects with rapid response prototyping. "When a customer needs a custom-designed product, Robinson said employees will be able to design and then mass produce it. The state-of-the-art facility includes an executive conference room, high-tech training room and even a gym.

The Robinsons, parents of an 18-year-old son with Down Syndrome, plan to hire five adults with disabilities from Haven Industries, part of Community Haven, an educational facility that works with disabled children and adults. "This brings a lot of heart to a business," Robinson said, as he explained how work stations would be set up for training. "A business without a heart and soul is just a place to work. We are trying to build a community here for people to feel they belong to this business. "About 130 county officials, business leaders, relatives and friends participated in the ribbon cutting and then were given tours of the business. At Wednesday's event, County Commissioner Vanessa Baugh read a proclamation announcing April 3 as Global Industry Day.

Sharon Hillstrom, CEO and president of the Bradenton Area Economic Development Corp., said it was time to recognize the businesses in the county expanding into global operations. "If you look at the direction we are going in, the emerging footprint of the global company is in this community," she said. "The number of companies expanding into international trade is growing. "It is an emerging global headquarters, this is huge for us," she said. "The building is beautiful. "The company has received \$12,000 in performance-based incentive funding from the county and \$48,000 from the state.

IRISS currently has 38 employees and plans to hire another 12 by the end of the year, Wells said. Some of the employees being hired were former Pierce Manufacturing workers who were laid off when that company ended its production of ambulances and emergency vehicles in 2012. Deborah Robinson reminisced Wednesday in the spacious headquarters about the early days of IRISS when she and her husband worked in a "tiny closet space with no windows." Today, four of her children work in the company.