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Daily Messenger (Canandaigua, NY)

He eyes the red planet with a special interest

Rochester's high-tech environment brought Fairport's Joe Pinto from a degree at MCC to special projects for NASA.

Published: February 14, 2004

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The whole world is glued to the pictures taken by Spirit, one of two NASA rovers exploring Mars. But one Fairport man is paying particular attention to the pictures.

After all, he took them.

Well, not personally, of course - no human has yet been to Mars - but Joe Pinto, 45, was in charge of making seven of the eight camera lenses used on the space rover. That's as close a connection to the red planet as any human has.

"Seeing that (the rover) is very successful at this point in time, we're very fortunate to be a part of it," said Pinto, an accounts manager at Optimax Systems Inc, in nearby Ontario. "Whenever we see something about Mars in the news or that new pictures are on the Internet, we check it out. It kind of really gives you a warm feeling inside."

Optimax specializes in making precision lenses on a fast track, Pinto said, and NASA - for reasons not specified - needed the lenses completed at the last minute. The normal production schedule for such lenses is eight to ten weeks, Pinto said. NASA needed them in four.

"Any lens for the technology of this type is a precision optic," Pinto said. "They're difficult to make, but it's something we do daily. I wouldn't say it's run of the mill, though. It was very satisfying to do."

Although Pinto works just outside of the greater Rochester area, he is very much a product of its high-tech culture.

"Rochester is considered one of the hotbeds for optical manufacture," he said. "I was just looking for a scientific field, a high-tech field, and being in Rochester this is just what I happened to fall upon. It's a pretty unique area."

He got a degree in optics technology at Monroe Community College, but that was only a start. "A lot of my background has been through on-the-job training," he said. "With 25 years in the field, that adds up to a lot."

That experience includes designing lenses for a high energy laser used in fusion experiments at the National Ignition Facility in California and creating the "Subaru" telescope - an 8.2 meter diameter telescope for the National Observatory of Japan.

"I was in charge of the manufacturing of that telescope when I was at a different company," Pinto said. "That size of a piece of glass, you're basically looking at a four-year project that we had to go through the manufacturing process to grind and polish the mirror."

The project was so big that, after completing all the grinding and polishing, they'd removed 20,000 pounds of glass.

"That program, and the Mars rover, they're both unique based on size," Pinto said. "They're on different ends of the spectrum, one involves very large equipment, the other extremely small. But when you're finished, they're both extremely satisfying."

Pinto and his family of four have lived in the Fairport area for the past seven years, and said that "we consider this home." And he emphasized that despite recent bad news about the local economy, the Rochester area is even more inviting to young people looking for a high-tech career than ever.

"Certainly we've had our problems with the economy and scale downs, but I think there's even more to offer in high tech, especially in the field of optics," he said. "Years ago, when people talked optics, it was stuff that you saw in your optometrist, and now it's high-tech stuff people immediately think about. There's a lot more written and a lot more vision. "

And cool pictures from Mars.

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