

In 1989 the hosiery manufacturers of the Carolina Hosiery Association began envisioning their own "field of dreams." They wanted to develop a hosiery center at the Catawba Valley Community College in Hickory to assure a supply of trained production personnel.

Since the 1970s, the industry has struggled along with a "fixer training" instructor. The classes were held in cramped facilities with out-dated knitting machines. The instruction was very basic for the mechanical era.

Finally, in 1989, the CHA Knitting Committee concluded that a successful program would have to be more encompassing and more up-to-date. The officials at the community colleges, while skeptical, agreed to participate in the planning for a hosiery technology and training center. So began a journey that has lasted 16 years.

The concept for a hosiery technology center was the focus of a 1989 CHA planning retreat at Opryland in Nashville, TN. The hosiery association directors and committee members came back with a plan. But no money.

Several months later, former Gov. Bob Scott, then president of the N.C. Community Colleges, joined the membership for a fall dinner meeting. He learned



of the center plans and offered \$37,500 in start-up funds. Catawba County commissioners agreed to match the appropriation after an appeal from manufacturers.

With \$75,000 available, the community college president Cuyler Dunbar and a committee of manufacturers began the search for an executive director. The job description: be an effective recruiter in high schools; inspire trainees; develop credibility with manufacturers and suppliers; raise money...

The only thing omitted was to walk on water.

After three interviews, Dan St. Louis emerged as the leading candidate. The vote to employ him was unanimous.

The center was set up in clean, open

quarters on the main campus. In the development of a training curriculum, St. Louis used the "dacom process" with employees in the industry breaking each job into tasks. He also attended every CHA board meeting to better understand the trends and priorities affecting the industry.

Scott's grant was a one-time act. A committee of hosiery executives, including Eulan Johnson of Johnson Hosiery Mills, raised \$15,000 in contributions. Long-term financing would depend on state support.

President Scott suffered a heart attack shortly after the center opened and was recovering when a delegation of hosiery executives and CVCC President Dunbar approached the state community college offices for money to keep the center alive.

They were rebuffed. "No money available," they said.

Less than two blocks from the headquarters of the community colleges is the General Assembly building. That's where the center found relief. A committee of hosiery executives-turned-lobbyists walked

the halls. Rep. Jim Black, a college classmate of CHA Executive Director Paul Fogleman, was then chairman of the House Education Appropriations Committee. He earmarked \$125,000 of the community colleges budget for the Hosiery Technology Center. That was 1991.

The following year, Fogleman and Robert Merritt, president of Renfro Hosiery Mill, returned to the Legislature. This time the appropriation was bumped up to \$250,000 for one year only. For 13 years, the center received funds from non-recurring sources, requiring a year-after-year lobbying effort.

In 2004, with the help of Speaker Black and Sen. David Hoyle of Gaston, the budget was increased to \$600,000 and in 2005, that amount was put in the recurring budget.

In 1994, North Carolina employed Dr. Walter Plisola to lead a state effort to make manufacturing more competitive. One of his strategies was to create a Manufacturing Extension Partnership to the state with federal funds.

Fogleman was asked to assist in the application process and earned over \$200,000 a year for the center:

That program continues under the management of the N.C. State University Industrial Extension Services.

In 1997, the Marketing Committee of the CHA suggested to St. Louis that a product testing service would enhance the competitiveness of manufacturers. The HTC organized as task force that spent almost three years developing industry standards for fit, color fastness and durability. In 2001, the center's hosiery testing center began operations and since has won national recognition.

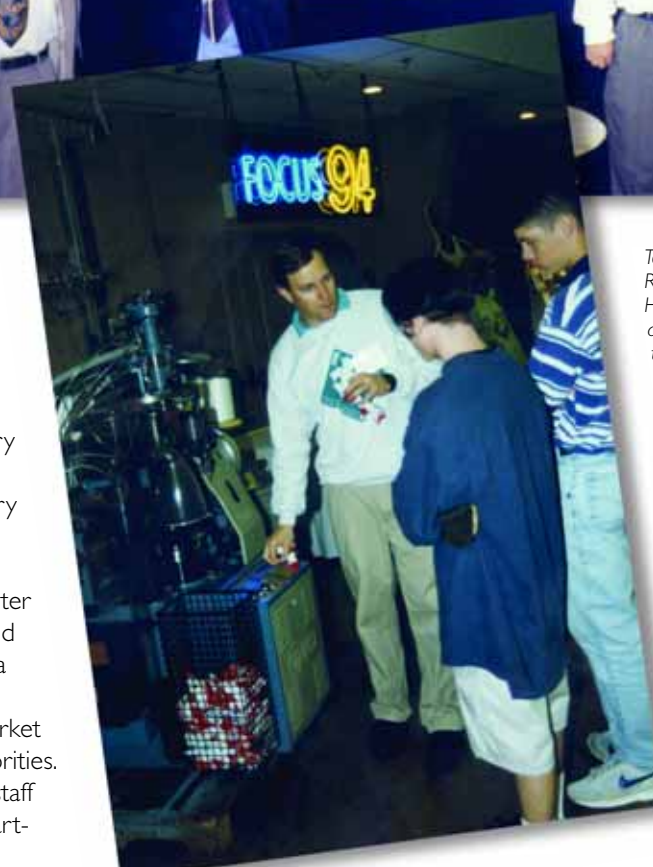
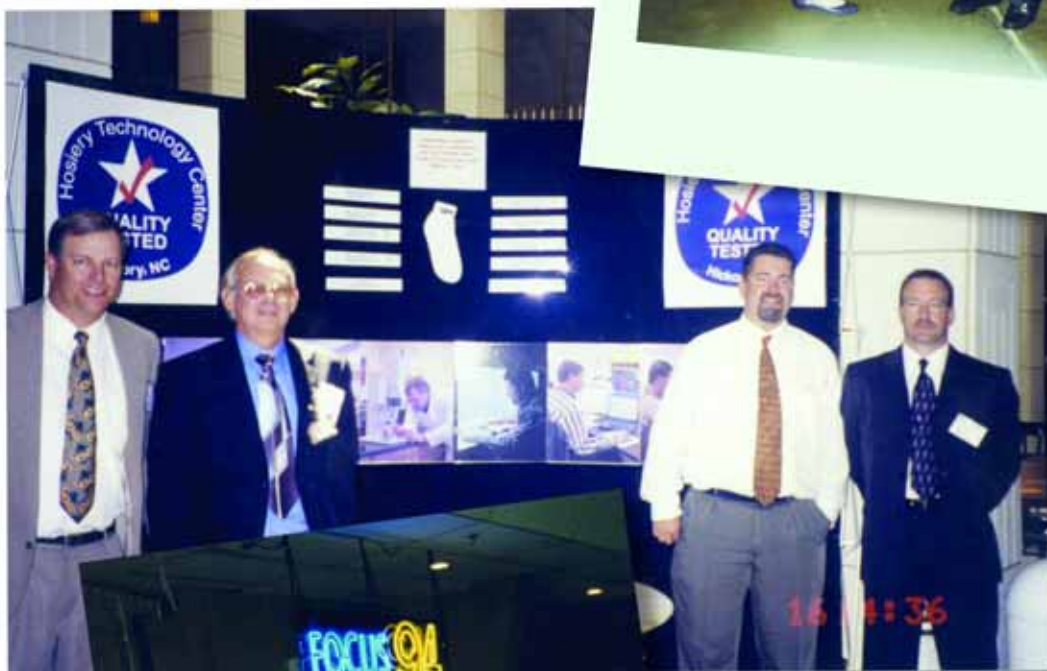
Under St. Louis' leadership, the center has broadened its outreach far beyond the original field of dreams. In 1995, a center was developed at Randolph Community College where today market research and in-plant training are priorities.

In addition to St. Louis, the center staff has grown to nine fulltime and five part-

time people, thanks to the rapid growth of the testing center and marketing activities.

The world of manufacturing has changed since the center and St. Louis came on the scene. Technology is driven by computers. Marketing is global. Competition is fierce.

But the needs are greater and the opportunities more enduring.



Top:
ROBERT MERRITT, former president of Renfro Hosiery Inc. could cut a rug on the dance floor as well as the Legislature. He helped in the initial lobbying activities on behalf of Hosiery Technology Center funding.

Middle:
The HTC's public relations program has included a display in the N.C. Legislative Building during the annual Hosiery Day at the Legislature.

Left:
HIGH SCHOOL students were introduced to hosiery technology in early 1990s by Dan St. Louis, the new director of the center at Catawba Valley Community College.