

# Beating the **ODDS** with **GRIT & SUPERB QUALITY**

*When business partners and owners, Leslie Liles and Kenneth Lee, set off to investigate a facility in which they could start their own operation, they could never have guessed what life had in store.*

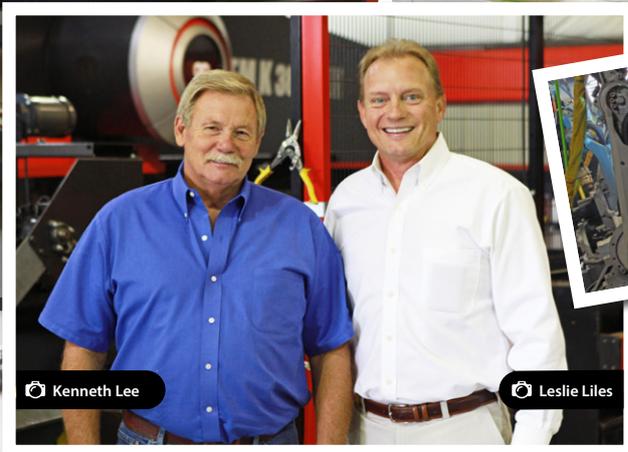


**Written by Pauline Müller**

**T**oday, twenty-four years later, General Metals, Inc., a high-end precision sheet metal fabricator based in Pine Level, North Carolina, is stronger than ever. Its distribution network spreads across Canada, the United States, and Mexico, and it wants people to know that no matter how many people tell you that you cannot achieve your dreams, you can only fail if you stop moving towards them.

Starting out from truly humble beginnings, General Metals, Inc. has become successful in a big way as an impressive number of Fortune 500 companies entrust it to work with an increasingly large number of their original equipment manufacturers (OEMs). It is known for its personal touch and partnership philosophy as well as its on-time delivery. ►►





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- ▶ General Metals, Inc. is particularly favored by retail giants, technology companies and international banks, who rely on its top-quality sheet metal fabrication for breaker housings and other sheet metal components. The company's next-generation technology allows it to operate in the telecommunications, biotech, gaming, and computer chip industries among others.

The fact that its main income is from annual bids stands testimony to the timely service and competitive prices that keep customers coming back for more. Whether components need to be sheared, punched, formed, welded, painted, assembled, or all of the above, this approved supplier is ready to take on even the biggest large-volume production projects made from scratch. Always delivering more than is expected, the company also stocks and ships any components clients might need that it does not fabricate itself.

The company's OEM components are used mainly in the electrical sector. Seventy-five percent consists of electrical equipment such as switchgear, battery backup systems, switching systems, and motor controls. The team does value added assembly, from partial to full mechanical assembly. The company also fabricates parts used in elevators, escalators, residential and commercial appliances, filtration systems and more.



General Metals runs lean operations with a tremendous focus on efficiency through ergonomic design and equipment like its fiber laser which makes operations as fast and smooth as possible for its fabricating teams, ensuring superb quality throughout. In fact, its three-building, 110,000-square-foot facility is so modern and automated that part of the equipment can be in full production without a single member of staff present. One of these buildings is a dedicated facility for progressive and pick-and-place production stamping for volumes of 25,000 pieces or more, and it currently manufactures up to 1.5 million of some units annually.

"We like to get to know our customers and the buyers we deal with daily, their electrical and manufacturing engineers who are drawing the products that we're building. We like to build relationships with these folks. It allows for better collaboration, especially when it comes to keeping quality and function but fabricating at lower prices," says Leslie. "It allows us to really help people and to become an extension of their business." Leslie is a very hands-on owner and maintains an open-door policy to ensure that customers are always welcome and any possible problems are solved quickly and efficiently.

At General Metals, Inc. it is all about beating the odds. "So many people get told they can't do things, but if you look at our background, most of what we have come to us very hard. All the things that people say got them behind in life is what we took as steps to make things better with hard work," Leslie says.

When the business started, Leslie was the only salesman on the job, and he and partner Kenneth had nothing short of an epic journey to develop the business into what it is today. The business began in 1994 after the unthinkable happened. Leslie and Kenneth had worked together at a sheet metal facility for ten years. During this time, Leslie learned to operate the equipment and then set out to master computer numerical control (CNC) machine programming. He moved on to become sales manager where he oversaw all the estimating. The company grew at such a rate that the department soon employed two or three more people to help handle sales. In the ten years Leslie and Kenneth worked here, the company grew from twenty employees to over five hundred in three locations.

Leslie and Kenneth, who was the paint shop manager and eventually became maintenance manager, saw an opportunity when they realized how many smaller clients were going by the wayside due to large contracts with mammoth corporations consuming all the company's resources and support. Kenneth and Leslie started thinking about going on their own and went out to look at possible premises from which they could operate.



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## ***“We did work hard, but I can’t take credit because I know that it was more than just us.”***

The duo got going by doing odd jobs. Kenneth was a licensed electrician, and so the two helped each other along the way until, after much hardship, trial, and tribulation, they managed to get loans with which they set up their first operation. They bought some outdated machines which Kenneth fixed.

“My wife had gone back to teaching, and I had to go door to door to sell as much as I could. We literally did all the work we could find; we mortgaged our homes to buy material and did everything we could to get the business off the ground, and we did in the end,” he says. On out of town sales trips, Leslie slept in his old white truck at rest areas and Walmart parking lots all the way from Pennsylvania to Georgia and Tennessee.

“Having people tell us that we couldn’t do it just made us more determined – right down to renting stables with a dirt floor in Four Oaks, North Carolina, because it was the only thing we could afford,” says Leslie. The roof had to be removed to get the equipment into the building as nothing fit through the door. Five years later, all debts were settled, and the rest is history.

Many unlikely, perhaps even miraculous, things happened that always saved the day in the nick of time. When the company steadily started growing, it seemed that the right employee would always arrive at the door at just the right time – without any advertising. “It happened the same with our customers. Just the right customer would come along at just the right time. We would get together and inevitably close a deal,” says Leslie. “We did work hard, but I can’t take credit because I know that it was more than just us. I sincerely believe that God was and still is blessing us even today with our employees, our customers, and vendors, and we owe our success to Him.”

Leslie’s take on success is simply to keep going forward – especially when it comes to family and business. “I wouldn’t have made it without my wife. She had absolutely no reason to stay, but she stuck by me, and I am so grateful for that,” he says.

The company’s team is fantastic and what impresses Leslie and Kenneth most about them is their willingness, loyalty, and grit. These are people who work hard to make the business successful. And this is something of which the owners are very proud. “Their reliability is absolutely crucial to our success, and they’re part of our family. When our people are hurting and going through a hard time, we want to be there for them to encourage them and help them through because they’re there for us every day.”

To this day, Leslie is still out on the road a lot and makes it his business to know his employees personally and keep up to speed with everyone’s lives. His teams know that whatever they come to him with remains confidential, as Leslie believes in really supporting his staff no matter what they are going through. “Working in steel is an intrinsically tough job, and that is why we do all we can to support them in all the ways we can, he says.

While there is a lot to be proud of, its ISO 9001:2015 accreditation is a great recent achievement as few companies of its kind hold this certification at this stage. Unlike the run-of-the-mill goal for growth, General Metals, Inc. aims to ensure that its employees and their families are well taken care of first and that growth remains on track. The company is without any doubt an organization of integrity and strongly believes that this is the basis of good service. Good quality at the right price and unparalleled fairness are what this team is about, and there is no doubt that it will remain steadfast in these goals for many years to come. ■



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