

PRESS RELEASE

Spark Awards Honor Innovation in Manufacturing Throughout Chicagoland

(GENEVA, IL–APRIL 29, 2022) “We rise together,” said Valley Industrial Association (VIA) President Kathy Gilmore in her opening remarks welcoming nearly 200 guests to the annual 2022 Spark Awards at the Arrowhead Golf Club.

Since the founding of VIA in 1902, the group has grown from 16 to more than 200 members with one higher goal in mind: to learn from one another. Nowhere is this more evident than the Spark Awards, where VIA members, located throughout the Fox Valley and Chicagoland area, are invited to rate themselves using 10 survey questions ranging from one to 10. They may submit in one or more of six categories: culture, innovation, operational excellence, safety, social responsibility and workforce development, with one additional award for the most improved. Contenders in each category are judged among their peers in two levels: those smaller and larger than 150 employees. There is no entry fee, and all VIA members are invited to participate.

The Spark Awards fulfills two of the VIA’s main pillars by providing tools for best practices and connection to growth.

This year, 13 companies were chosen as finalists, which means they then were invited to be interviewed by a panel of three judges diving deeper into real data backing up their survey answers. During these interviews, judges explored each finalist’s systemic approach, metrics, how they have adjusted and improved, and lessons learned.

“There are good jobs, good wages in manufacturing. It’s a great story to tell,” said Jacob Margulies, president of Continental Envelope and this year’s VIA chair.

The winners of the 2022 Spark Awards were Simplex System Controls, Inc. for level 1 and Flexco for level 2 in the culture category; Aurora Specialty Textiles for level 1 and Bison Gear & Engineering Corp. for level 2 in the operational excellence category; DuKane Precast for level 1 and Flexco for level 2 in the innovation category; Simplex System Controls Inc. for level 1 and Sonova USA for level 2 in the workforce development category; Tek Pak, Inc. for level 1 and United Scrap Metal for level 2 in the safety category; and Aurora Specialty Textiles for level 1 and Sonova USA for level 2 in the social responsibility category.

Simplex System Controls stole the show in the most improved category. Consideration for this category was rigorous. Contenders needed to have benchmarked in all six categories for two years in a row. Simplex System Controls showed a 48% improvement rate with CEO Kurt Sundberg pointing out how “amazing and impactful” the VIA has been in making an impact for his and many other midsize manufacturers.

“We’ve grown with the program,” Sundberg said. He shared that there were two people involved in the Spark Award application from his company the first year, then four the second year and, in 2022, six. “The value isn’t winning, it’s exposure to concepts and discussions. It’s about expanding ideas into the company. If you’re not improving, you’re falling behind.”

A runner-up in the most improved category was Smith & Richardson with a 34% improvement rate.

Antony Nettleton of Naperville-based Sikich, the country’s 25th largest account firm and platinum sponsor of the event, honored the manufacturing professionals in the audience by saying, “We keep focused on the companies that made us who we are today, companies like you.” Other sponsors included Gierach Law Firm, LLC, sponsor of the all-important cake; Webit Services which helped implement the technology for the benchmarking survey; and IMEC, a key contributor to architecting the survey process and guidelines.

Companies may start submitting surveys in mid-June 2022 for the 2023 Spark Awards.