MINISYSTEMS. From page 1

“They needed an inspection, like a report on "what to do" in case of a spill," she said. “So I went to their plant and did a report. I can do audits because I know the Code of Federal Regulations.”

Despite that knowledge and 30-plus years in business, MiniSystems Inc. remains a small, home-based firm. The Lees take on three or four jobs a year ranging from mechanical design to information technology. The couple would like to see MiniSystems Inc. grow to 30 or 40 jobs a year, but that’s easier said than done.

“We found out the most difficult part of the business is not the technology, it’s the connections with people who trust you,” Noel Lee said.

“We are first generation here,” Rena Lee added. “We don’t have families to back us up. Like if we go broke, we can’t just go to our parents’ house or something like that. So we have been pretty conservative and kept our jobs.”

Rena Lee works a full-time job as a technical specialist at the Vitrrification Plant while Noel Lee serves as a consultant and is now helping on a project for Westinghouse. But the engineers wouldn’t hesitate to quit their day jobs if the right contract came along.

“I think in another year or two we’ll go full time,” said Noel Lee. “The difficult part is where to get the contract.”

Even as a woman-owned minority firm with years of experience, the competition among engineering circles is steep. According to the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory’s Economic Development Office, there are more than one hundred other engineering service firms in Benton and Franklin counties. Still, Rena Lee believes the chances of expanding MiniSystems Inc. are better than most.

“After all, she has beaten the odds before. Rena Lee was the first in her family to go to college. She was also the only woman chemical engineering major in a class of 240 students at Taiwan University. Rena Lee later gained acceptance into the PhD program at Johns Hopkins University. At the time, she spoke no English.

“The first book I studied in English was thermal dynamics,” Rena Lee said.

OPPORTUNITIES. From page 9

It was also the ‘without borders’ aspect of the group that initially grabbed McDonald’s attention. He had heard of Doctors Without Borders, a similar group comprised of traveling medical professionals, but had to stumble across Engineers Without Borders on the Internet.

Nationally, Engineers Without Borders has both student chapters, including ones at Seattle and Gonzaga universities, and professional chapters. Those chapters are collectively responsible for 80 projects currently being carried out in 35 different countries around the world.

When McDonald first got wind of the organization, he immediately welcomed it as a way that he could impact people’s lives before completing his degree. “I realized I didn’t have to wait until I graduated to help out; I could do it right now,” he said.

But before the WSU Engineers Without Borders can begin traveling internationally, they have a few things to work out—the first being that they need to raise some money. McDonald figures the group will need an annual operating budget between $60,000 and $80,000. His plan is that the chapter will raise about $40,000 on its own and then look for a donor or group of donors to match that amount.

Luckily, when it comes to raising money, Taylor said the chapter seems to have a few things on its side. The first is that it is made up of students, which means people are often more willing to donate to them. Secondly, they are operating a nonprofit, charitable entity, which has helped get them donated materials from businesses.

The chapter also has a few legal issues to work out. The university doesn’t hold the liability for the students in other countries, so they are looking at purchasing limited liability insurance on a case-by-case basis.

As the organization grows, it’s also not out of the question that WSU Tri-Cities, which has a smaller engineering program than the Pullman campus, could have its own chapter of Engineers Without Borders, according to Taylor. But first, the Pullman chapter needs to become stronger, he said.

Crane and the other members think that it will.

“If this organization becoming a huge selling point for the WSU campus,” Crane said. “I really want to see this organization grow into a part of the culture on this campus.”

“[We want to] pass the knowledge on to the other generation,” added Rena Lee. “That knowledge is very valuable.”