UB engineering professor Venkat Krovi, who helped attract the convention, hopes some engineers stay. Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

UB professor attracts world’s engineers to Buffalo for conference, tech expo in August

Buffalo will become the epicenter of the mechanical engineering universe for four days in August thanks primarily to the steadfast efforts of a University at Buffalo professor to lure the trade’s largest conference to Western New York.

The American Society of Mechanical Engineers – the primary standard-setting organization for engineers – annually hosts a conglomerate conference that covers 11 separate disciplines within the profession.

It has made stops in past years to Chicago and Montreal. Next year it's headed for Boston.

This year, when the ASME brings its "Big Game" to the Buffalo Niagara Convention Center Aug. 17-20, Buffalo will serve as an incubator for several new twists to the conference dreamed up by Venkat Krovi, an associate professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering at UB.

The ASME, in collaboration with the University at Buffalo, for the first time will offer a career fair and engineering expo as part of the event in an effort to integrate industry professionals with academics and students and to show off innovations in manufacturing technology.

Krovi, who serves as general chair for the conference, hopes the new aspects will become mainstays for future conferences.

With the University at Buffalo as a backdrop, senior undergraduate and graduate students from Western New York – not just from UB – and around the world will be able to network with industry leaders.

The expo portion, called the 2014 Advanced Design and Manufacturing Impact Forum, will be open to "anybody who wants to get their technology fix," Krovi declares.
It will showcase exhibits and presentations that cover some of the hottest topics in manufacturing, including self-driving cars, “Avatar”-like vertical lift aircraft and 3-D printing, to name a few.

In all, the conference is expected to attract 1,500 to 2,000 people from around the world.

Krovi recently sat down to answer questions about how Buffalo reeled in the conference and what people can expect when it rolls into town.

Brandon Schlager: What is the ASME and its annual conference all about?

Venkat Krovi: The ASME is the premier professional society for mechanical engineering. Although it’s an American society, it’s an international forum. We have about 130,000 members from across the globe.

The conference that is coming here is called the ‘design conference’ because, as mechanical engineers, we have not done a great job showcasing all of the places mechanical engineering is useful.

BS: This conference is generally reserved for larger venues in Chicago, Washington, D.C., Montreal. Why Buffalo?

VK: The majority of the members of our community get the chance to go to one conference a year. They not only want to go to the conference to meet their fellow engineers and learn from them, they also want to have a little bit of fun. And so picking a venue where you can actually do that, I didn’t have to work too hard. I said, 15 miles from the Convention Center is Niagara Falls. I think that pretty much sold itself.

BS: Was there a sense of surprise when Buffalo was awarded the conference?

VK: We proposed three sites, and we wanted it to be close. So we asked for Buffalo, Niagara Falls or Toronto.

I don’t want to brag here, but it was a figment of our collective imaginations a couple of years ago. To have it come together nicely like this, I have to thank a lot of stars.

BS: Has feedback been positive about the location of the conference?

VK: Yes, and no. The one question I keep getting: ‘How much snow is going to be there?’ I say, in August, you just have to come and see.

Our hope is that when people come and see the quality of life that is here, the rich opportunity that has always been here and now with things like SUNY 2020 and the Buffalo Billion, they’ll be impressed by the energy. By having them come here and get a feel for the place themselves, we hope a few of them say, ‘Hey, Buffalo is a place I want to set my roots down and start a family.’ There’s a lot of opportunity here and there’s a real opportunity to sort of recapture some the glory of years past.

We want to move the conversation ever so slightly from the snow to all these other things.

BS: What can be expected of the career fair and expo portion in its inaugural year?

VK: We’re going to have some concept cars on the floor, the 3-D printers. ... We’re trying to showcase the ways in which every aspect of our daily lives are going to be touched by some of the technologies that are coming through here.

This is not intended to be just for the engineers. This is not intended to be business. We also wanted to showcase how it’s going to touch people’s everyday lives in some of these many different ways.

BS: What does the Buffalo engineering community have to offer to those coming from out of town?

VK: I’ve been to these types of conferences everywhere. Moog, we discount it as this local company. But when you go anywhere outside, the people in the engineering community say, ‘Oh, you’re from Buffalo?’ That’s where Moog is, ‘because Moog revolutionized engineering. Fisher-Price is a common, household name – literally.
In another sense, Bethlehem Steel used to be here. Bell Aircraft was here. Calspan. So within the engineering community, there is a lot of recognition that a lot of really good engineering came out of Buffalo. ... You know the saying, ‘Speak softly but carry a big stick’? I think that’s probably what Buffalonians do when it comes to engineering.

BS: Which direction is the manufacturing industry headed?

VK: Traditionally, if you built something, it had to be built locally. And you tried to keep all your suppliers close by. Today, you can take a part, any part, digitize it into bits and bytes halfway across the globe and then reconstitute it with a 3-D printer. This is your teleporter from ‘Star Trek.’

These innovations are coming about and they’re changing not only how we interact with day-to-day things, but also the way we live our lives. Not all technology is necessarily making us better off, but it’s changing the way we live.

A full list of speakers and events can be found online at go.asme.org/impactforum.