



Jacqueline Marque ♦ Daily News staff

David J. Collins, left, chairman of A2B Tracking Solutions in Portsmouth, is honored Monday for his development of the bar code 50 years ago and the company's contributions to the advancement of technology. Applauding are Sens. Sheldon Whitehouse, center, and Jack Reed, both D-R.I.

Bar code founder honored for his vision 50 years ago

By Sean Flynn
Daily News staff

PORTSMOUTH — The father of the bar code, the label found on almost every item in grocery and department stores, is the chairman of the board of a Portsmouth company run by his two sons.

David J. Collins started working on a system to automatically identify railroad cars soon after earning his master's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1959. Employed by Sylvania in Needham, Mass., and leading a small group of researchers, he developed KarTrak, the first commercial use of a linear bar code. He tested the first bar code scanner to read red, white, blue and black bars

mounted on rail cars of the Boston & Maine railroad in 1961.

Collins was the guest of honor at a 50th anniversary celebration of the bar code that was held Monday morning at A2B Tracking Solutions, 207 High Point Ave. The company was founded by his son, Peter Collins, who is the president; another son, Timothy Collins, is the chief operating officer.

The company collectively has obtained more than \$100 million in Department of Defense contracts in the past decade and is part of the Aquidneck Island defense industry that is key to the local economy.

On hand for the celebration



David J. Collins, center, receives a commendation from Massachusetts Gov. Francis W. Sargent, left, in 1968, after Collins founded Computer Identics Corp., the first company whose product line was based entirely on bar codes and laser scanners. Chris Kapsambelis, right, worked with Collins in developing the first bar code.



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Timothy Collins, left, and his father, David J. Collins, right, of A2B Tracking Solutions in Portsmouth, talk with Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee and Rep. David N. Cicilline on Monday during a 50th anniversary celebration of David Collins' development of the bar code. Timothy Collins is the chief operating officer of A2B Tracking Solutions.

Founder

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were Sens. Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse, both D-R.I.; Rep. David N. Cicilline, D-R.I.; and Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee.

"I want to commend the extraordinary vision and ingenuity of David Collins and his associates for the past 50 years," Reed said. "The bar code has proliferated throughout this country's economy and the world's."

David Collins became aware of the need to automatically identify train cars when he worked at the Pennsylvania Railroad as an undergraduate. Successfully accomplishing that task, he went to Sylvania's management looking for funding to develop a black-and-white version of the code for other industries. After they declined, Collins left Sylvania in 1968 to start Computer Identics Corp., the first company whose product line was based entirely on bar codes and laser scanners.

Located in Canton, Mass., Computer Identics in 1982 introduced Code 128, the most commonly used bar code in the

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DAVID J. COLLINS

founder of the bar code

world today.

"We wanted the bar code to have a broad market," Collins said in an interview Monday. "It turned out to be that."

He had with him one of the first brochures promoting the use of the bar code for different functions, one being tracking streetcars.

"They don't have streetcars anymore," he said with a smile.

Many products have come and gone since the development of the bar code, Collins said.

"Bar code still has a lot of life in it," he said. "It's still the backbone of retailing and manufacturing, and has other uses. Look at FedEx. The bar code allows you to follow the path of a package until it is delivered. It also has military applications."

Attending the anniversary celebration

Monday were Chris Kapsambelis and Chuck Mara, two associates who worked with Collins at Sylvania and then left with him to start Computer Identics.

"We were the Three Musketeers," Collins said.

A2B Tracking Solutions is following in the Collins family tradition. The company recently received a \$20 million contract from the Department of Defense to develop two-dimensional bar codes — or 2D Codes — for the extensive inventory of the armed forces. The company's computer software and printers are now printing 750,000 codes to put on Air Force equipment, Peter Collins said. The company has produced 1.2 million codes so far this year and expects to produce twice that amount by the end of the year.

The company now has 20 teams deployed at 50 air bases around the country, he said. An A2B employee leads each team, but the rest of the team is made up of local technicians hired as subcontractors, he said. A2B now employs a total of 50 people, he said.

Flynn@NewportRI.com