

## Firm's pigments inspired by Mayan ruins

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Lori Polette-Niewold, Mayan Pigments chief technical officer, said she is intrigued by the steadfastness of Mayan colors, which have survived for centuries.

EL PASO, TEXAS (Oct. 23, 10:50 a.m. EDT) -- The distinctive colors displayed in Mayan ruins and replicated by researchers is allowing startup Mayan Pigments Inc. to offer pigments that it claims are environmentally friendly.

The company started on the campus of the University of Texas at El Paso and is taking steps to commercialize a process that produces organic and inorganic hybrid pigments that are not heavy-metal-based.

The state's Texas Emerging Technology Fund provided \$250,000 in September as the first installment of a \$1 million grant to get the company more exposure. The company also has received money from the National Science Foundation — \$100,000 for phase one and recently \$500,000 for phase two.

"I thought from the start that I should form a company," said co-founder

Lori Polette-Niewold, chief technical officer of Mayan Pigments.

She said she was intrigued by the hardiness and steadfastness of colors developed by the Mayans, which survived hundreds of years, and possibly more than a thousand. Polette-Niewold's work led to a doctorate from UTEP in material science in 2002. She used the patented process to start Mayan Pigments in 2005.

The company now has four employees doing sales and research. They are based in an incubator at UTEP, but also use contract manufacturer Custom Processing Services Inc. of Reading, Pa., to make the pigment. The new money will be used to expand its marketing and sales.

"The materials are quite amazing. They have a lot of potential, including plastic injection molding, which we went after first, but I'm always intrigued by the possibilities," said professor Russell Chianelli, a co-founder who remains at UTEP.

Chianelli is an investor and board member, but remains committed to research.

"I continue to look for other opportunities. The ancient people had a lot of technology that maybe we arrogantly didn't think enough of to study before," he added.

The patented pigment process is quite simple, according to Chianelli, and the only by-product is water.

Polette-Niewold said the colors' hardiness stand up particularly well for use in plastics, and paints and coatings. It can also be used for cement, stucco, fibers and artists.

Her enthusiasm is also drawing interest from the industry — the company has a new president and chief executive officer with over 30 years in the chemical and materials industry — Millicent Pitts, and has a longtime veteran, Gary Williams, serving as the senior vice president.

Pitts is a former vice president at Englehardt Corp., and is enthusiastic about the MayaCrom pigment lines' prospects. She said it is offering colors with new color index numbers, something that is rare.

"They have a lot of growth opportunities and certainly some intriguing colors," Pitts said.

She said the firm had some early sales and about 50 customers are testing the colors.

A wide range of colors are being offered, she said.

"We are able to sell on two aspects — first it is green and second, because of its physical properties," she said.

Eight MayaCrom pigments recently were assigned new Colour Index Generic Names and Constitution Numbers by the Society of Dyers and Colourists. They include yellows, blues, reds and violet. Pitts said it is quite an honor, in that Colour Index is the only authoritative international reference work on published colorants.

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